chapter 3  LESSONS LEARNT FROM 25 YEARS OF HUMAN RIGHTS WORKS

25 years of human rights work presents both a need and an opportunity to reflect on the highs and lows of the movement in Asia. What worked? What did not work? What lessons have we learnt? And what do we need to keep in mind moving forward into the future?

All people that contributed to this publication – through an interview, by participating in an event or by submitting written inputs – were asked to reflect on possible lessons learnt. Based on their work, on the experiences of their organisations or their partners, what insights did they gain? What have been lessons learnt from 25 years of human rights work?

Many lessons were shared. The following chapter describes the issues and experiences most often mentioned throughout the consultations. Obviously this selection is subjective in nature, both because the reflections stem from individuals and small groups, but also because of the individual choices of the editors. Still, we hope they are useful for anyone that is working or wants to work in the human rights field.

While many of these lessons are related to and cover broad parts of human rights work and the field, we have clustered them into four categories: 1) organisational or strategy related insights; 2) individual and personal reflections; 3) lessons related to the people and communities that we try to serve; and 4) long-term advice.

1. Organisational or strategy related insights

Not surprisingly many insights relate to organisational or strategy experiences. Lessons that were gained being involved with civil society organisations (CSOs), movements or networks for many years. Lessons that are to be kept in mind when deciding on strategies, identifying key stakeholders or developing action plans.

The importance of movements, networking and solidarity – there is strength in numbers. All contributors to the publication highlighted the importance of working through movements and networks. Particularly when focussing on the protection and promotion of human rights. Working in isolation is highly undesirable. All progress that has been gained for human rights or social change, has been the result of movements.

• The undeniable power of solidarity – in direct relation to networks and movements is the recognition after years of human rights work of the power of solidarity, solidarity between human rights defenders (HRDs), across borders and with those working in other sectors or institutions. In itself, understanding that there are others that
stand, support and look out for you is incredibly powerful. Solidarity is crucial in emergency situations. Colleagues and partners can speak out on your issue, reach out to influential stakeholders for you, or arrange for you to be temporarily relocated.

- **Making efforts more effective through collaboration and coordination** – the amount of work that needs to be done to promote and protect human rights at times seems endless. Everyone is busy and overwhelmed at all times. To make sure HRDs do not duplicate or unintentionally counter each other, collaboration and coordination are essential. Particularly when it comes to capacity building, knowledge development and advocacy. It is important to work together and align efforts.

- **Across local, national, regional and international levels** – one of the main benefits, but also challenges, of working through networks and movements is the opportunity to align efforts across local, national, regional and international levels. Regional and international campaigns gain legitimacy by assuring that efforts are grounded in insights and updates from affected people and communities. When engaging with regional and global partners, local and national working HRDs can be heard beyond their own reach. Communication and the exchange of information is crucial to make this work.

- **Cross-sector connections** – human rights cannot be realised in isolation from the rest of society. Collaboration with other sectors is crucial for human rights progress. Important sectors identified to work with include: development; economics and trade; conflict prevention and peacebuilding; migration; and climate change and the environment. The human rights movement in Asia needs to engage institutions and stakeholders that do not specifically focus on human rights. In Asia the traditional stakeholders are, among others, the UN Human Rights Council, the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR), the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC), or human rights related UN Special Rapporteurs. We need to look beyond just them.

**The power of the media** – the media plays a crucial role in society. Every day, every moment people make decisions in their daily lives based on information they receive from the media, traditional and social media. Whether it is what to wear based on weather reports, which area to live in based on local news, or who to vote for based on national coverage of electoral campaigns.

To be visible and covered in the media is of great significance for the human rights movement. Media offers a means to have issues and updates be heard by the general population, but also by targeted audiences, like policy or decision makers. At the same, the media presents a channel to mainstream a human rights discourse.

However, the relationship between civil society and the media has not always
been an easy one. Misunderstanding and trust issues have made collaboration challenging. In the current environment in many Asian countries space for civil society is shrinking and press freedoms are severely restricted. This provides an opportunity for an alliance between HRDs and the media that would be beneficial for both.

Women’s rights are human rights – the need to mainstream gender and women’s issues across the human rights movement is still a work in progress. The recognition that all women’s rights are human rights, and that all human rights are women’s rights has been crucial for the advancements made in Asia so far. Human rights work must mainstream gender perspectives in all aspects of its work to fully realise its goals.

Youth are not just the future, they need to be included today – when speaking about youth there is a tendency to refer to them only as the future. However, youth need to be included, capacitated and empowered today.

In many Asian countries youth – when following the UN definition of youth being people between the ages of 14-25 – represent a significant portion or even a majority of the population. At the same time, youth are among the most vulnerable groups in society. Especially, in regards to human rights violations. They are often direct targets of repression, because of their age, social status and lifestyle. Additionally, restrictions on human rights, including the right to education, health care or employment, have a particularly significant effect on youth, some with long-term consequences.

The failure to include youth in the human rights movement today, can have detrimental consequences for current efforts and those in the future.

It is important to speak to power, but we need to be able to back-up what we say – one of the major roles of HRDs is to speak out, criticise and inform the authorities on human rights violations. HRDs need to be the voice for victims of violations or those whose rights are under threat. Similarly, it is one of the primary roles of the human rights movement to hold Governments to account when it comes to the commitments they have made, and call them out when failing to stick to their word.

In doing so, it is crucial that we can back-up what we say. Advocacy needs to be based on evidence and facts. Documentation and maintaining records of violations is crucial, even in times when such data cannot be used immediately for fear of repercussions or threats. The maintenance of documentation of violations can be instrumental at a later stage to assist a campaign or legal proceeding.

Be consistent and persistent – change takes time. One-off activities or events are unlikely to make a difference. It is important for HRDs to be consistent and persistent in the issues they speak out on. When you continue to speak out on certain issues, the narrative and discourse become consistent,
recognisable and eventually more acceptable to target audiences. This requires persistence, even when the odds seem to be against us.

**Be focussed and specific** – there are many topics and issues related to human rights. All are vital and all are urgent. Civil society at times has the tendency to want to cover all that is important, and consequently says a little bit on everything. It is imperative to be focussed. A topic needs to be developed with research and expertise. Related to this is the need to be specific. Even though many issues are interconnected, sometimes it is better to try to tackle one thing at a time instead of everything at once.

2. **Individual and personal reflections**

Another set of reflections and advice focussed more on individual HRDs. Lessons that were learnt that could be of value for those people that aspire to become involved in the human rights movement or are new to it.

**Everyone can be an HRD** – anyone who becomes involved in the human rights movement can be an HRD. It does not require any particular background, education or skills. Everyone can find their role and can contribute to the human rights movement.

**You can only become an HRD by doing** – while all recognised the value of studying human rights, reading or watching documentaries, it was agreed that you can only become an HRD by getting involved. HRDs are those that join an organisation or movement, take on a cause. Get their hands dirty. You learn to be an HRD by doing, not by studying it from afar.

**Learn to share the stage** – the issues and situations that the human rights movement addresses are often tragic and devastating. More so, the issues are often personal, because of the group of people they involve or the country they affect. At times this makes it challenging to see beyond your own story or emergency. It is important to know that others are suffering too. To realise that your problem is not the only problem that requires attention, and to be able to share the stage with other victims.

**You cannot protect anyone else, if you do not protect yourself** – human rights work can be physically and emotionally draining. The seemingly endless list of things to do, the feeling that if you do not do it no one will, and the constant stress takes a toll on everyone. In many cases, pressure from family and loved ones, while well-intended and based on concerns for safety and well-being, can make the work of HRDs especially challenging. It is important to remember that if you collapse out of exhaustion or stress, because you are trying to save the world, you cannot protect anyone else.

**Be courageous while being safe** – undoubtedly being an HRD requires courage, particularly in certain countries in the region where standing up for human rights exposes you to physical or legal threats. It is important to be
courageous, to stand up for what you believe in, and to speak out for those that cannot do so themselves. Yet, here again it is important to be cautious and keep yourself safe too. While sacrifices might be asked of you, no one should have to pay the ultimate sacrifice.

3. Lessons related to the people and communities we try to serve

The third set of lessons focussed particularly on how to engage with or serve those people and communities that we presume to represent. The people and communities from whom civil society derives its legitimacy when speaking on human rights issues.

The need to reach out and engage with those we presume to help – it is essential to constantly ascertain that all we do, as a human rights movement, benefits those that we presume, claim or try to help, particularly the poor and marginalised. To be able to do so, we need to reach out and engage with these people on a regular basis.

Making people understand – to be able to reach out and engage with the people and communities we try to help, it is critical that we can explain and make them understand what we are working on. Complicated concepts and technical terms are often not helpful. More so, it is important to be flexible with such concepts and definitions, since people’s understanding of human rights depends on their context.

Need to be amplifiers for the people – following the earlier mentioned insights, it was also noted that it is crucial for civil society, in particular HRDs, to amplify the messages and stories of those people affected or threatened by human rights violations. We need to speak on behalf of those that cannot do so themselves, and make sure that they are heard. We need to be a bridge between the grass-roots communities and the national, regional and international political arenas.

Important to involve all sections of society – even though priority must be given to those affected most by human rights violations, it is important that all people in society are included in the conversation on human rights. Even the privileged or the perpetrators of violations need to be heard and understood to eventually come to the full realisation, promotion and protection of human rights.

You cannot be limited to the Capital – many CSOs are based in the Capitals or big cities of their respective countries, and rightfully so, considering infrastructure and facility needs. It also makes networking and engaging with other stakeholders easier. However, it is important to make sure that the issues we prioritise and the voices that we represent are not limited to those same Capitals and big cities. That we reach out to others beyond the city limits, and engage with rural and isolated communities equally.

The need to focus on education and empowerment – while it is the role of HRDs to represent and speak on behalf
of those that cannot do so themselves, eventually our role as messengers should not be needed anymore. The education and empowerment of peoples and communities is key to all human rights efforts. For the full realisation, promotion and protection of human rights, people need to be aware of their rights and able to speak up for themselves. The human rights discourse needs to be mainstreamed in our communities and societies. Education and empowerment are the primary strategies to make that happen.

4. Long-term advice

Finally, many lessons learnt referred to the long-term perspectives of the human rights movement. Many of these insights reflect a realistic, or at times even pessimistic view on what can be accomplished. However, it is important to note that all these insights were part of an overarching belief in change, and a conviction that what we do is not only important, but indispensable.

For every step forwards, you will be forced to take a few back – successes and victories are few when fighting for human rights. More importantly, it was noted that for every step forward, you will be forced to take a few steps back. These steps back can come from new challenges that are presented when something is realised. For example, when a new human rights institution is established, its mandate might not be to our liking or the way it implements its activities might be disappointing. It forces us, after our initial victory, to step back and rethink our next move.

However, more often than not, such steps back also come from push-backs from the authorities. The ratification of a Declaration might be used as an excuse to not do anything further on that topic. Or international recognition for a claim made by a national HRD, might result in persecution of that same HRD by its own Government.

All of this does not mean that we need to give up, nor that we should not celebrate our victories, it merely means that whenever we realise something that we have been working for, we need to keep our eyes open and be vigilant for new challenges.

While you can put an issue on the agenda, you cannot control what happens to it – in a similar fashion it was noted that as civil society we need to know the limits to our influence. In many settings we can highlight issues, push for topics to be put on the agenda or make a concern public, but this does not mean we can control what happens with it once it is out there.

At times, it might not be understood, presented or viewed from the perspective that we intended, or it might be even be taken into a completely opposite direction. Here again it means that we need to monitor how things are interpreted and explained, and ensure that we do all we can, within our sphere of influence, to promote our point of view.

Words mean little without implementation – many also highlighted that while at times we need to celebrate words, in the form of the adoption of
new laws, the ratification of conventions or legislation that establishes new institutions, such words can mean very little if we do not like what is done with them afterwards. Implementation is key.

Sometimes words can even be counter-productive. They might provide Governments or other authorities the impression or the excuse to act like the job is done. Similarly, if words or intentions are not matched with resources and capacity, even the most well-drafted laws and best formulated mandates will mean little in practice.

**Justice does not automatically trickle down** – even when changes in legislation or jurisdiction are realised and implemented, this does not automatically mean that all people in society will benefit from them. Particularly poor, marginalised or isolated communities need to be pro-actively assisted to benefit from such breakthroughs. Unless people know there is a new law, institution or regulation that they can benefit from, they will not be able to do so.

**Human rights is not a sprint, it is a marathon** – considering all of the above, it is clear that realising, promoting and protecting human rights is not a simple task. It is a long-term process that requires HRDs to be in it for the long-haul. It is not a sprint, it is a marathon. And unless we realise and plan for this, we will soon be disappointed and burned out.

**Not just a marathon, but a relay** – in addition to the work for human rights being a marathon, it is also a relay. The work is too much, too complex and too extensive for just one person, one organisation or one network. It will require many to work together, and more importantly it will require a new generation to be ready to take over from the current generation of HRDs.

To be able to do so, we need to convince more people of the need to fight for human rights, to capacitate and empower them. To make sure that when we cannot go on any longer, a new generation will be ready. If we do not do that, the baton will drop, and our running will have been for nothing. But if we manage to grow our movement with new people, with new energy and new skills, they will eventually be able to run across the finish-line.