

Taking Action

The need for activism

Human rights education is partly about developing attitudes of respect for human rights. However, it is also about more than that because, no matter how respectful of human rights we and our colleagues or friends may be, we live in a world where violations of human rights are all around us. We cannot, unfortunately, stop those violations merely by education – or not in the short term, anyway.

Young people see this too, which can sometimes even undermine our educational efforts. After all - what use is it to know about the UDHR, if no one pays any attention to it in the real world? What use is there in recognising violations when we see them - if there is nothing we can do to stop them? And what value is there in our empathising with the suffering of victims - if that is only an addition to the pain caused by those violations?

Encouraging young people to take action against human rights abuses is important not just because they really can make a difference in the world. It is important also because that is something that young people want to see. It can be empowering, encouraging, and motivating for them to realise that their actions can make a difference; and it can bring to life the reality of human rights in a way that no activity or lesson could do for them.

Which methods can we use?

The second part of this chapter is devoted to concrete steps that you may undertake with your group. Following this introduction, we consider some *simple steps to activism*: a series of small activities that can be used to send a powerful message. These are listed under 4 sub-headings:

1. Being informed
2. Publicising issues
3. Linking up with existing organisations
4. Getting results!

These categories are intended more for organisational purposes than in order to signify any particular sequence or order of events, but there is some progression of greater involvement from one category to the next. However, this should not be interpreted too rigidly, since many of the proposed actions will actually fall under more than one of the categories. The important point is that they are able to be conducted in isolation from one another, and they involve relatively little preparation.

The suggestions for action are not in themselves radical, and you are quite likely to be already undertaking many of them in your existing work – designing posters, debating issues, organising cultural events, meeting with different organisations, writing letters etc., but such apparently simple methods are in fact the very same ones that are used by professional activists, and they are effective.

In fact, almost any methods go! What will make your work with the group qualify as *activism* are the aims you set yourself, and the extent to which you take your work out into the community.

“What you do may seem terribly insignificant but it’s terribly important that you do it anyway.”

Mahatma Gandhi

“He who accepts evil without protesting against it is really cooperating with it.”

Martin Luther King

“If you cry ‘Forward’ you must without fail make a plan in what direction to go. Don’t you see that if, without doing so, you call out the word to both a monk and a revolutionary, they will go in directions precisely opposite?”

Anton Chekhov

Planning

The third section of the chapter is concerned with effective planning. Of course, planning normally comes first, and whatever you do will require careful planning beforehand. However, this section has been included not so much to help you with one-off activities but rather with developing a more strategic approach to your activism, once people have gained a deeper understanding of the issues. If and when the group seems ready to implement a more systematic approach, then it will probably be helpful to look at the planning exercises, and to work through some of them. The exercises will help the group to define and formulate more precisely the aims they are trying to achieve, and the better they are able to do this, the more likely are their chances of success.

Allow the group to propose their own suggestions, and they will probably come up with ideas that are better fitted to their own skills, and are therefore more likely to have a better impact.

Some simple steps to activism

Find out; keep up to date

No-one can do anything unless they know what is going on. Being informed is one of the most important steps for effective activism and it will help to spark ideas for different things that you can do. But don’t regard the search for information as necessarily a dry or static affair: information is all around us, and we need to be imaginative about making use of different sources.

Find out what’s happening locally

- Look in the local and national papers for stories about rights violations.
- Contact the people concerned for those stories that particularly interest or trouble you: is anyone already doing something about it?
- Make a wall collage of the different cases, connecting those that deal with the same rights; and follow up what happens to them.
- Discuss with your group the possible ways of tackling the issue.
- Talk with members of minority or disadvantaged groups, and find out what their concerns are.

? What’s going on? Where?

What is your country like compared with others?

- Find out which international treaties your government has signed up to, and what these treaties say.
- Find out whether international human rights NGOs (such as Amnesty International, the International Federation of Human Rights Leagues or Human Rights Watch) have any current concerns about your country.
- Find out what the government is doing about this.
- Find out which NGOs exist in your country to work against human rights violations.

Find out what's happening in the world

- Decide which human rights issues concern you most, and find out in which parts of the world these rights are particularly under threat.
- Mark the violations of these rights on a map of the world.
- Take a particular country or region (not your own) and look at the main sources of violations in this region.
- Find out which organisations are doing something about this – and contact them for more information.
- Look at the web-sites or publications of international NGOs and intergovernmental organisations (Council of Europe, UN, UNDP, UNHCR, etc).

Action

Example: Carry out a survey in your neighbourhood

A survey can be an important way of making contact with your local community if you are seeking to undertake effective action. You can test the water by seeing how people respond to particular issues; and that will help you to decide on paths of action that are particularly necessary and that will be viable in your community. Talking to people in the community is also a good way of publicising the work you may be doing, of informing others, and of drawing in additional support. Any surveying can also be combined with more concrete action.

? How well do you know the views of people in your community?

Who can we ask?

A survey could be carried out...

- among people you know – your friends and family;
- in your school – with pupils or teachers (or both);
- on the street;
- with minority groups, or other disadvantaged communities;
- among other youth groups;
- among businesses;
- by dropping forms through letterboxes (and returning to collect them at a later date).

What can we investigate?

You could take some of the following areas to draw up your survey. Look at the activity “To vote or not to vote”, on page 238, for further details on how to carry out a specific survey.

- Find out what other people know about human rights:
 - Are they aware of their rights if they are apprehended by the law?
 - Are they aware of anti-discrimination legislation?
 - Are they aware of [e.g.] a particular law currently under consideration?
 - Are they aware of what recourse they may have if their rights are violated?
- Find out what they think is important:
 - Which rights issues concern them most in their everyday lives?
 - Where do they think there are the most serious violations?

- Are they concerned by [e.g.] a particular issue or violation?
- Have they ever acted on a particular concern?
- Find out whether people would be prepared to act on any of their concerns:
 - Would they do anything to express their dissatisfaction with an issue?
 - Would they be prepared to take part in a street action?
 - Would they be prepared to sign a petition about ...?
 - Would they be prepared to write (or sign) a letter to a government official?

? Which issues concern you? Would you be prepared to do anything about these concerns?

Publicise the issues

Any publicity is good publicity

Activism works, in general, through the power of numbers. Politicians the world over have to take notice of large numbers - because no one individual is more powerful than a large enough mass of population. So the more people you can attract to your cause, the more likely are the chances of achieving a positive result.

However, people lead busy lives, and they will not always willingly give up time and energy to a cause that seems to have no connection with their immediate lives. So you may need, first of all, to *inform* and *interest* them; and to think of ways of doing so in an original and lively manner that will make them sit up and take notice. Make people laugh, make them stop and stare – and even try to shock them. You want to draw attention to yourselves!

- Design a poster, or a series of posters, to attract attention to a particular issue. Organise an exhibition and invite friends and family to come along.
- Build a web-site to publicise the work your group is doing in the area of human rights.
- Set up an Internet discussion group – and tell your friends about it. Try to get people involved from different countries.
- Make your own video or organise a theatrical production on a human rights theme (see the activity “Act it out”, on page 86).
- Write a song, or a musical, or your own play, and perform it!
- Organise a public debate on a topical issue of human rights: invite friends to come along.
- Design an informational leaflet raising concerns about a human rights issue; hand them out on the street, or put them through letter boxes.
- Write an article for the local (or national) paper.
- Engage in human rights education yourself! Contact other youth groups or local schools and see if they would like you to talk about your work.

Action

Example: Try to get the press interested

? Will the event you are organising be of interest to other people? How can you make them want to read about it?

If you are planning an event, try to use the local papers and radio and TV to publicise your activities. It is always best to write down what you want to say, because this saves journalists time. It is more likely that they will use your item if it is on the desk in front of them than if they have to come to interview you. There is also a greater chance that it will be accurate.

Remember:

- Keep it short and simple, avoiding jargon and abbreviations.
- Write a short, punchy but summarising heading.
- The first paragraph should cover the basic details: who, what, when, where and why.
- In the second paragraph, explain what you are doing in more detail.
- Any additional or background information can go in the third paragraph.
- Make sure you put “for further information, contact...” at the end of the press release.
- Type it on one side of the paper only, using double spacing.

“For me, Human Rights Education is when I work with young gays and lesbians, talking about their life, about their feelings, about questions of normality.”

Martin Krajcik, volunteer, participant at the Forum on Human Rights Education.

Join forces with another organisation

Do a survey of the NGOs working in your country (or region)

- You can normally find out about these by obtaining a list of the non-profit organisations registered with your local authority or with the relevant Government Ministry. Try a web-search or a trip to the local library. If you know of an organisation that is working in the area, they will often be able to point you towards others.
- Don't forget to find out which international NGOs are working in your country, or which take a particular interest in your country.
- Remember to look at organisations that may not necessarily call themselves 'human rights organisations'. Take a broad view of human rights, and include groups that may be working with the disabled, with low-income families, with victims of domestic violence, or on environmental issues.

See if you can arrange to go and talk to someone at the NGOs and find out about their work; or invite them to come and speak to your group.

- Make a chart of the different NGOs working in your region: record the rights that they are working on, the methods they use, their geographical scope and the number of employees and volunteers.

| Organisation | No. of employees (volunteers) | Types of rights | Methods | Area Covered | Volunteers required for... |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------------|---------------|----------------------------|
| 'Greenia' | 5 (6) | Environmental | Campaigning, education | Local | Mass protests |
| Amnesty International | 2 (12) | Civil and political | Lobbying, campaigning, letters | International | Writing letters |
| 'Women are Right!' | 10 (8) | Women's rights | Education, women's refuges | National | Distributing leaflets |

Offer to volunteer for a local organisation

Many organisations will have a team of volunteers, and may be able to offer hands-on experience in return for some part-time voluntary assistance. Young people may be given the opportunity of working with professional activists in the field and gaining useful work experience, as well as insights into the work of the third sector.

However, you should remember that some organisations may be cautious about taking on new volunteers, at least in the beginning, where the time of regular staff may be required. So

before approaching them, prospective volunteers should think hard about the following issues:

- Can you spare the time to give voluntary assistance?
- What commitment can you give to the work? Can you provide the organisation with any guarantee that you will be a reliable volunteer?
- Which skills do you have? What would you be able to offer an organisation such as this?
- What does the organisation do? Are you interested in the issues?
- What do you want to get out of it? Have you discussed this with the organisation?

Join a local human rights group, or set up your own

“Amnesty inspires us to play. The music cuts through to people, and the message is clear: you can write a letter or send a postcard. And the more you give, the more you get back.”

Bono of U2

Amnesty International is a membership organisation, which relies on the work of thousands of volunteers throughout the world. Individuals in your group may be interested in joining, or you may want to consider setting up your own initiative group. You would receive some materials and support from the organisation, and in return would be expected to assist them in their campaigning and lobbying actions.

Contact the Amnesty Section in your country, if there is one, for more information. Or contact the International Secretariat at 1 Easton Street, London, WC1X , UK; or see their web-site: www.amnesty.org

The International Federation of Human Rights Leagues (FIDH) was the first international human rights organisation to be created (in 1922) and its purpose is to advance the implementation of all the rights defined by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the other international instruments protecting human rights. With more than 105 organisations from 86 countries, it is mostly a network of expertise and solidarity, producing credible reports on violations in many countries.

You may start by finding out if there is a human rights society in your country affiliated to the FIDH, and ask them for materials or for particular concerns about your country. At www.fidh.org you can get the addresses of the national societies and look at reports published.

Fund-raise for one of the NGOs

One way of providing assistance to a human rights organisation – which they probably won’t turn down! - is to offer to raise money for their activities. Before organising any fund-raising activity, you should contact the NGO and make sure that they know what you are intending to do and how you are going to do it. Ask their advice. Some organisations have strict rules about fund-raising and may not accept finance that has been raised in certain ways.

Think about the capacities of your group and about the most effective way of raising money within your community. Brainstorm the possibilities, and discuss with members of the group what they would feel happiest about doing.

? Could you use these methods to raise money for your own group’s activities?

- Running a sponsored event (run, swim, etc.)
- Making and selling your own products or artefacts
- Organising a disco or other cultural event for which people buy tickets
- A car-boot sale, jumble sale, fête, summer fair, etc.
- Approaching people on an individual basis on behalf of a charity
- Organising a raffle
- Suggesting to a charity that you participate in one of their fund-raising events

Getting results!

This section looks at a number of actions that have specific targets, and where, in general, immediate results are anticipated. They are mostly “one-off” actions and, for that reason, you

will need to be particularly careful to plan them with the group. An action that does not achieve the specific results that were desired can be very dispiriting, so you need to make sure that each step has been thought through beforehand. Look at the section “Getting organised” in order to help you draw up an action plan.

It will often be sensible to combine your efforts with some form of publicity, since this will be likely to increase the impact.

Examples:

- Organise a street action – to draw attention to a human rights issue. People may be concerned about a specific new law, plans to build a factory in a conservation area, unethical business practices by a well-known company, particular infringements concerning a minority group, a local council decision to close down a public building – and so on. Think about the way you want to get your message across and who your target audience will be.
- Organise a “hearing”. One way to bring about change is to make sure other people listen to what you say. At a hearing, influential local people such as councillors, business people, school governors and community leaders sit on a panel and answer questions from a panel of young people. Think about who you would like to invite to sit on the adults’ panel, and write to ask them. Discuss who you want to be on the young persons’ panel, and brainstorm a list of questions that you would like them to ask.
- Improve your local environment. Think about the type of environment you want, and discuss ways that you could contribute to this aim. Cleaning up communal areas, planting trees and flowers, clearing ditches and ponds are obvious places to start, and you can achieve satisfying results with minimal resources. But you may have more ambitious aims: think about including other members of the community in your project, or putting your proposals to the local council.
- Offer assistance to groups or members of the population in need – this may be help for the elderly, for disabled groups, low-income groups, minority groups, etc. You may want to raise money for a specific purpose, to assist them with clothing or provisions; to help them raise the profile of the group; to help with lobbying the government for their interests; or simply to offer them companionship and moral support.
- Write a letter - to government officials, your MP, the Head of State, the business community, the press, or other interested parties, expressing your position on a human rights issue. This is a favourite campaigning technique of Amnesty International, and is an effective way of letting those responsible know that there is public concern about an issue.
 - Make sure you find out how to address the person properly.
 - Start with a statement of your key message.
 - Explain who you are, and who you are representing.
 - Indicate how your addressee is accountable.
 - Make a maximum of three points, and support each one with a clear argument.
 - Repeat your message at the end of the letter.
 - Indicate what action you would like your addressee to take.

“Do not wait for leaders; do it alone, person to person.”

Mother Teresa

“Happiness depends on being free, and freedom depends on being courageous.”

Thucydides

“Chi Wen Tze always thought three times before acting. Twice would have been enough.”

Confucius

Devising a plan of action

In general, good activism requires good planning. That doesn't mean you *have* to start by drawing up a general plan - as long as you are clear about your aims, you could try any of the suggestions in this chapter, with relatively little preparation. However, a planning session in the group will help you to focus on exactly what you want and are able to do, and what is the best way of achieving your results. For more ambitious aims, this is probably an advisable first move, since an action that doesn't achieve its desired results can be discouraging. You need to make the first thing you do *effective*.

Try working through the four stages below within your group:

1. Find out where you stand: do a SWOT analysis for your group.
2. Decide on the problem you want to address, and the results you want to achieve.
3. Think of the best way you can to address it, given the resources in your group.
4. ACT!

Where do you stand?

“Real knowledge is to know the extent of our ignorance.”

Confucius

A SWOT analysis is an effective way of drawing out the characteristics of your group, and of looking at the particular circumstances outside the group which might influence what you are able to do.

A SWOT analysis (example)

What are the strengths of our group?

- It's big!
- We have time on our hands – and we're keen to do something
- Misha's father is a politician
- We have a meeting place in the centre of town
- Gabriela is good at public speaking
- Bojka has a computer

What are the weaknesses of our group?

- Too many leaders!
- We haven't got any money
- Very few girls
- We've never done anything like this before
- Some of us live a long way from the centre of town
- We don't always work well as a group

What opportunities exist outside the group?

- There's been a lot in the news about human rights
- There are elections coming up
- There are some grants available for projects with refugees
- There's an Amnesty International group in the neighbouring town
- We have a new town hall that would be good for a theatrical event

What external threats exist to our activities?

- The economic situation is precarious
- Some of us have exams coming up
- The council is threatening to ban public meetings
- There's a lot of hard feeling about refugees taking local jobs
- It's too cold to do anything outside

The acronym SWOT stands for:

Strengths: the things your group is good at doing

Weaknesses: the things your group is not so good at doing

Opportunities: the possibilities outside the group that you might use to your advantage

Threats: things outside the group that might get in the way of what you are trying to do

Divide the group into four smaller working groups, and allocate the tasks of drawing up Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats among them. Then bring the group back together and see if people agree with their colleagues' analyses.

The diagram above is one example of a completed analysis, and may be useful in prompting you with ideas. But don't stick to it rigidly! Your group is unique, and you will have other strengths (and weaknesses) that you need to identify for yourselves.

Where do you want to get to?

Which issue do you want to address? Are there any obvious and pressing injustices that you want to take on or is this going to be a general protest against human rights violations?

Brainstorming Issues

If the group has already worked through some of the exercises in this manual, they may already have a number of ideas. If you are just starting work, you may want to prompt them with some of the following suggestions (or others of your own). Try to give them some information about each of the issues, and then ask them to go away and do their own research before you meet again to decide on priorities.

A sample problem list:

- The death penalty in my country
- AIDS on the African continent
- An ageing nuclear power station
- Negative attitudes towards refugees
- Child labour
- Freedom of the press in another country / my country
- The rights of minorities to education in their own language
- Domestic violence



Which groups in your society suffer the most serious violations of human rights?

If the group is ready, and you have already looked at some of the issues in detail, you could begin by drawing up a list of their concerns in a general brainstorming session. Which issues do people feel strongly about?

See if you can narrow the list down to about 3 or 4 issues – perhaps those that are most keenly felt, and which are realistic for the group to tackle. You will need to talk through the different choices, but could make the final decision by taking a vote, if the group finds it hard to reach agreement. Give them 3 votes each, which they can use as they wish: they can vote for one issue 3 times; for three issues, giving one vote to each; or for two issues. Then add up which of the issues received the most votes.

“How wonderful it is that nobody need to wait a single moment before starting to improve the world.”

Anne Frank

“The clever man is not he who provides the right answers; it is he who poses the right questions.”

Claude Lévi-Strauss

“Trees and stones will teach you that which you can never learn from masters.”

St Bernard of Clairvaux (c. 1100)

Refining your objectives

It may be helpful at this stage to draw up a ‘problem tree’ for the issue you have decided to address. This can help to focus attention on the roots of your problem, and can help you to understand all the components that are contributing to a specific issue. You may then decide that it would be more effective to look at one of the ‘root’ problems, rather than approaching your original problem directly.

- Start by writing down the problem that you wish to tackle in the middle of a large sheet of paper.
- Underneath this, write in all the factors that contribute to the problem, and link them up to form the roots of your original problem.
- Take each root at a time and think about its causes, drawing in the factors that contribute to the problem.
- Keep tackling each root until you can take the exercise no further: the tree may have deeper roots than you think.
- You may also want to extend the ‘branches’ of the tree in the same manner: these will be the *symptoms* of your original problem. You may find that what you began with as your main concern is actually the root or branch of a different tree.
- When you have finished, take a look at your tree. Should you tackle the task you originally set yourself or one of its contributing factors first? Has the tree helped you to think of ways to go about tackling this problem?

How do we get there?

Designing a strategy

Once you have a clear picture of the possibilities of your group and have decided on the problem area that you would like to tackle, you will be ready to move on to think about the best means of approaching your problem.

You need to think about :

1. the specific problem you are going to address: *what was the outcome of the Problem Tree exercise?*
2. your target audience: *who are you trying to influence?*
3. which changes you would like to come about within your target group: *think about what you want them to do or think as a result of your action.*
4. how these changes are supposed to come about: *think about the type of thing that is likely to influence your target group.*
5. what methods you can use to effect these changes: *think about the different forms of action outlined in Part 1, plus any other ideas of your own. Which is the most appropriate method to use in the circumstances?*

Work through the different stages of the plan on page 280 (Diagram 2), discussing each stage in the group as a whole. You need to have agreement in the group over each component of your plan: if some members are unhappy about the enterprise, you are likely to be losing some valuable resources in your group.

Getting organised

Finally, before the practical business can get underway, you will need to draw up an action plan

“The goal is not always set in order to be achieved, but in order to serve as a point at which to aim.”

Joseph Joubert

to decide the organisational questions. If you fail to do this, you may find that some of the important tasks were not done, and that can have a serious impact on the aims you have so carefully worked through.

You need to decide:

- What tasks need to be done?
 - Who is going to undertake the different task(s)?
 - When are they going to be done?
1. You should write everything down to keep a check on how your plans are going. You will need two large sheets of paper and a felt tip pen.
 2. Make sure everyone is clear what the topic is that you are discussing. Choose one person to be the scribe. Write a heading at the top of the paper. Brainstorm a list of *all* the jobs that need to be done and write them on one of the large pieces of paper so that everyone can see.
 3. If you are organising an event, think it through, imagine what is going to happen on the day and double-check that you have thought of all the jobs.
 4. Now go through the list deciding whether jobs need to be done now, soon or later. Put either N, S, or L by each job.
 5. Use the second sheet of paper as a “decision sheet”. List all the tasks to be done in order down the left-hand side, then in the next column write down who is going to do each one. Finally, in the third column note the deadlines for getting the jobs done.
 6. Share out the jobs among you: do not leave it all to one or two people. Think what would happen if they were ill or got overloaded with other work!

Here is an example of what a decision sheet might look like.

Decision sheet

| Event: Street action on minority rights | | |
|--|---------------------------|--|
| Task | Who does it | When |
| Design leaflets to hand out | Sally, John, Natalie, Ben | Meetings on Sept 10 th , 17 th |
| Organise publishing | Rumen, Ben | After 20 th Sept |
| Make banners / placards | All | Week beginning 24 th Sept |
| Buy materials for banners, etc. | Shila, Karen, Ivan | Week beginning 17 th |
| Get other people interested | Shila, Moca, Tania | Week beginning 17 th |
| Contact local council | Damien, Sue | When date is confirmed |
| Tell police | Damien, Sue | |
| Try to get influential local figure to attend | | |
| Inform minority groups | | |
| Draft speeches | | |
| Organise refreshments | | |
| Clearing up afterwards | | |

“He is able who thinks he is able.”

Buddha

Diagram 2

PLANNING A PROGRAMME

