Chapter 12

The Role of Information and Communications Technologies in Human Rights Monitoring and Advocacy

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ABSTRACT

This chapter analyses tools and techniques used to document human rights abuse. It outlines the opportunities and pitfalls associated with the use of information and communication technologies by human rights organizations, and it examines the importance of rigorous documentation to underpin human rights work. Tools developed to help grassroots organizations record usable and actionable information are contrasted with an initiative that actively involves citizens in the reporting of xenophobic attacks. The analysis shows that the tools and systems used to monitor human rights violations are essential to the effective implementation of human rights standards. It also shows that new technologies can empower ordinary citizens to become directly involved in awareness building and debate about human rights abuse.

‘Live as if you were to die tomorrow. Learn as if you were to live forever’. -- Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948), Indian philosopher, internationally esteemed for his doctrine of nonviolent protest.

INTRODUCTION

Human rights are a set of universal claims that exist in order to protect individuals from oppression, discrimination and illegitimate coercion, typically by state actors. They provide the basis upon which the notions of dignity, equality and human security can be upheld and promoted at all levels of society, and they are codified in a widely endorsed set of international undertakings known as the International Bill of Human Rights. This includes the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on...
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Economic Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and a number of other internationally recognised covenants. These have been given effect to varying degrees at national level in order to provide protection to individuals and to enable them to realise their full potential as human beings.

In a 2003 Harvard University lecture, the former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Mary Robinson said our challenge today is to give meaning to the values of human rights in our own communities as well as in the global community of nations (Robinson, 2003). Echoing the words of Eleanor Roosevelt who played a vital role in the drafting of the UDHR, she said that without concerned citizen action to uphold human rights at home, we will look in vain for progress in the larger world. In order for the human rights obligations of states to be understood and taken seriously as legal obligations, there is a need for research, analysis and reporting by non-governmental organizations within and on behalf of local communities. Respect for all human rights – including civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights – is primarily the responsibility of national governments. Human rights groups and activists, often with different agendas, work together at local, national and international level to hold them accountable and to bring pressure to bear to address deficiencies in their human rights record.

A number of factors have contributed towards addressing traditional and emerging forms of human rights abuse. These include the emergence of an international human rights regime, growing transnational social movement networks, increasing consciousness and information politics (Brysk, 2002). Globalization creates new opportunities to challenge the state from above and below according to Brysk, but it also creates new human rights problems related to the shrinking of states, the decision-making power of global institutions, the integration of markets, international flows of information and people, and the spread of cultures of intolerance. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) play an important role in all of these. As the various players increasingly leverage and apply new technologies we see significant changes from the traditional distributions of power in the international system (Selian, 2002).

This chapter looks at the role of ICTs in human rights advocacy, and provides an analysis of some of the tools and techniques used to gather, report, analyze and disseminate information on human rights abuses. It outlines the opportunities and challenges associated with the use of ICTs by human rights actors and it examines the importance of rigorous documentation and verifiable information sources to underpin human rights work. This is followed by a case study describing how an initiative that actively involves citizens in the reporting and dissemination of information contributes to awareness raising in relation to a human rights issue. Finally the added value of tools designed specifically to record and analyse human rights data is discussed, and their value in the context of the overall human rights regime is described.

BACKGROUND

ICTs represent the most significant technological breakthrough of the last half century. The costs are declining dramatically, and new applications that improve our human and organizational capabilities are being developed every day. Communications and information flows are becoming more instantaneous, more global and more content-rich as a result of technological innovation and convergence. These have contributed greatly to the enhanced transparency and accessibility of human rights information for citizens, particularly in terms of legal and administrative information, but they have done even more to improve the administrative, organizational and management skills of community and grassroots organizations, and thus ‘to tip the scales of power slightly back towards an equilibrium’ (Selian, 2002, p.19).