



NEWS FROM

Hemispheres

THE INTERNATIONAL OUTREACH CONSORTIUM
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

FALL 2008

IN THIS ISSUE: Defining Human Rights

Hemispheres's 2008 Summer Teachers' Institute, *Recognizing Rights and Responsibilities in the 21st Century*, addressed questions of how human rights are defined, in the most expansive sense of the term, and how rights and resources are being claimed and fought for around the world.

Throughout the week, workshop speakers provided an international context for the rights-related challenges we face today by looking at crucial rights in civil, political, cultural, and economic realms. Topics included: water conflict and community rights in Gujarat, India; the role of the performing arts in promoting dignity and equality in Latin America; marriage and divorce rights in Islamic laws; land rights of Afro-Brazilians and of indigenous people of the Russian North; and issues related to violence and individual rights in North Africa during the Holocaust, El Salvador during the 1980s Civil War, and contemporary India, Chechnya, and the Balkans.

We started the week with a discussion of how we, individually, define human rights. The activity included in this issue of *News from Hemispheres* is based on that discussion and uses *Vote with Your Feet*, an activity presented at the workshop by Ann David (Language and Literacy Studies, UT College of Education).

The international touchstone for human rights is the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, which can be accessed in full, in 337 languages, at <http://www.unhchr.ch/udhr/lang/eng.htm>). The declaration, originally signed in 1948 and about to celebrate its sixtieth anniversary, is the foundation for international human rights law. The UDHR set forth twenty-nine articles in "recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family [as] the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world." But the document is not all encompassing, and new international resolutions are needed to address contemporary rights-related issues.

Vote with Your Feet asks students for their opinions on global human rights issues that are relevant today. In addition to the activity, we have provided background information on if/how these issues fit within the UDHR and how struggles for these rights are playing out in Latin America, the Middle East, East Europe, Central Asia, and South Asia. Both the activity and the background information can be used to kick off a class discussion of the complex issues surrounding human rights around the world.

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Culture

Article 27 of the UDHR declares:

(1) Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.

(2) Everyone has the right to the protection of the moral and material interests resulting from any scientific, literary, or artistic production of which he is the author.

CONTEMPORARY CULTURAL RIGHTS ISSUES

TURKEY Turkey has a large minority population of ethnic Kurds, who live primarily in the south and southeast of the country, near the borders with Iran and Iraq. The Republic of Turkey has a secular government that defines anyone born within its borders as “Turkish,” regardless of their actual ethnicity. Because of their unique culture and language, Kurdish expressions of “Kurdishness” often have met with suspicion and oppression.

Until 1991, it was illegal to speak the Kurdish language in public. Playing Kurdish music also was against the law, as was broadcasting the news, and publishing books or newspapers in Kurdish. Many of these restrictions resulted from the guerrilla war that some Kurds waged against the Turkish government during the 1980s and 1990s in the hopes of establishing an independent Kurdistan.

Between 2000 and 2005, there was a relaxing of many of the restrictions: the ban on Kurdish language media was lifted, and forty-five minutes of Kurdish language programming was scheduled on Turkish TV. However, prejudice and many obstacles remain: the mayor and city council in one town in the Kurdish region were fired for using Kurdish to spread information about local city services ranging from tourism to trash pickup. “[Turkish Kurds] don’t expect so many things—[just] their own culture, language, and richness, but it’s not allowed in Turkey,” says Hasan Gungor, head of the Diyarbakir branch of the

Teachers’ Association. “A child is born, but can’t be taught in [his or her] own language. It’s a big infringement of human rights.”¹

INDIA In 1995 the U.S. Department of Agriculture and a pharmaceutical company were granted a patent to extract an anti-fungal agent from the Neem tree, which grows throughout India. The Indian government challenged the patent on the grounds that the technology for which the patent was granted had been in use in Indian villages for more than 2,000 years. The result was widespread public outcry and the patent eventually was overturned. At stake in this case, and others like it, is the increasing trend for large multinational drug companies to acquire, by means of patents, legal rights over indigenous biomedical knowledge—without compensation to the groups who originally developed such knowledge.

The pharmaceutical company involved in the Neem case argued that traditional knowledge of the medicinal properties of the Neem tree never had been published in an academic journal. In response, India has been translating ancient manuscripts containing old remedies and publishing them in electronic form in an effort to protect its heritage from being exploited by foreign companies.

Another case, from 1995, resulted in a more positive outcome for an indigenous group. The Kani of the South Indian state of Kerala, a traditionally nomadic group that numbers around 16,000, had long known of a wild plant with profound immunity-enhancing, anti-stress, and anti-fatigue properties. An Indian pharmaceutical company developed and marketed an herbal drug, Jeevani, based on the Kani’s knowledge of the plant, and agreed to pay 50 percent of Jeevani’s royalties to the tribal community.

Class Discussion Questions

* Do you consider the ability to participate in cultural life—whether through performances, literature, or even TV—a basic human right? Why or why not?

* Who has the rights to profit from knowledge: local people who have known about medicinal plants for centuries or foreigners who learn about them and apply for legal patents? Explain your answer.



Women Chipko activists protecting trees because of their practical and cultural importance, http://www.righttolivelihood.org/chipko_pictures.html

Education

Article 26 of the UDHR states:

(1) Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.

(2) Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.

(3) Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.

CONTEMPORARY EDUCATION ISSUES

EASTERN EUROPE The Roma, commonly called “Gypsies,” are one of the most widespread minority groups in Eastern Europe. While some Roma still travel to find work, many live in settled communities, often on the outskirts of large towns and cities. Roma children face a unique situation in regard to education. One factor is poverty—while public education is free, transportation to school and textbook fees might be out of reach for financially struggling families. Roma children also face language difficulties—often their first language is a dialect of Romani, with limited skills in the language of the prevailing culture. This puts them at a disadvantage from the very beginning. Roma parents also fear that mainstream schooling will result in a loss of their cultural identity. While Roma parents recognize the value of literacy, many consider much in mainstream education to be irrelevant to the practicalities of their lives. From an administrative viewpoint, schools complain of spotty attendance, poor student skills and resulting bad grades, lack of parental support, difficulty in tracking school and medical records for traveling families, and early dropout rates.

The Council of Europe is working to address some of these issues. One important project is training Roma “mediators” to be liaisons between Roma communities and schools. They also encourage the creation of teaching materials in the Romani language. To dispel cultural prejudices about “Gypsies,” the Council recommends using the media to promote a positive image of Roma traditions, culture, and practices instead of reinforcing stereotypes.

EGYPT Public education in Egypt is free and compulsory for all students for the first nine years. Promotion from primary (grades 1–6) to intermediate (grades 7–9) is based on passing scores on standardized tests. Students may choose to enter secondary school (grades 10–12), which is free but not compulsory.

Although education is compulsory, the government does not enforce school attendance, particularly in rural areas. Further, promotion between levels is based only on test scores: academic

performance is not considered, and the test may only be retaken a set number of times.

The quality of education in the free public schools is poor. Classrooms are overcrowded, students frequently have to share textbooks, and in some rural schools, students’ families donate supplies such as chalk, pencils, and paper because they are frequently not provided. Teachers are underpaid and scarce. Some classrooms have more than sixty students, and classes are held in morning and afternoon shifts. The quality of the public education system is such that nearly all families who can afford to do so either send their children to private schools or hire tutors for them. In 2006, the government newspaper

Al-Ahram estimated that private tutors account for 20 percent of total household expenses. Tutoring also has a negative effect on the classroom experience. Says Noha Hussein, whose twelve-year-old daughter has had a tutor since the third grade, “There’s no teaching in schools. . . . The school assumes that the student is relying on outside tutoring, so the teacher himself says, ‘Why teach?’”²

Class Discussion Questions

** Do you consider the right to education a fundamental human right? Why or why not?*

** If so, how can we make sure that everyone gets a good education?*



Sun peeking through the haze over Mexico City, photo by Christopher Rose, 2008

Healthy Environment

This is not addressed in the UDHR. Our increasing understanding of how humans affect the environment—including global warming and overuse of natural resources—has created new areas for human rights conflicts. In order to provide for human rights, we need a healthy environment, but the granting of certain rights to individuals may damage the environment. The responsibilities of multinational corporations have not been addressed directly by human rights legislation.

CONTEMPORARY ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

MEXICO Mexico City suffers from pollution problems that make it hard to breathe for the more than 20 million people who live there. Situated at a high altitude of

7,800 feet, Mexico City is surrounded by two major mountain chains that rise high around it to create a bowl that traps pollution in a perpetual cloud over the city. Factory emissions and heavy traffic, always increasing due to urban migration, have been the leading causes of Mexico City’s air pollution since the early 1960s. The government has worked on the problem by imposing car restrictions (based on license plate number, cars are required to stay off the roads for one day each week), upgrading buses, improving fuels and automobile emissions standards, and working with industry to reduce pollutants. Government programs cut toxic emissions in half between 1994 and 1998, but have made little progress since then.

While many residents feel that the air

quality has improved, new studies have revealed that, in addition to other health issues, children in the city develop unusually small lungs and the pollution has damaged people's sense of smell, making it hard for them to identify common aromas like coffee and oranges. The government has an active educational campaign that urges residents to take a role in improving air quality by changing their habits of energy consumption. However, as one engineer has noted, trying to reduce air pollution is like trying to "fix an airplane while it's in flight."³

INDIA Deforestation is a severe problem in India, where forests are a critical resource for rural people, especially in mountainous areas. Dense forest coverage supports agriculture that feeds families and supplies fuel, fodder, building timber, and even medicinal herbs, particularly for indigenous groups. The forest also plays an important role in stabilizing soil and water resources.

Before state intervention, indigenous people had full access to forests, and strong community organization supported sensible use of forest resources. Starting in the mid-1800s, the Indian government nationalized much of the country's forests and began to regulate strictly local community access to forested areas. Although the government maintained that it would allow deforestation only for scientific and legal purposes, it regularly allowed cutting for commercial profit.

As forests increasingly have been cut back for commerce, Indian villagers have tried to protect their livelihoods through non-violent resistance. Beginning in the 1970s, protests, led primarily by women responsible for their family's subsistence, spread throughout India and became known as the Chipko Movement. The name comes from a word meaning "embrace," due to villagers' method of putting their bodies between trees and contractors' axes in order to protect them. The Chipko protests achieved a major victory in 1980 with a fifteen-year ban on green cutting in the Himalayan forests. Since then the movement has spread to other parts of India and generated pressure for a natural resource policy that is more sensitive to local people's needs.

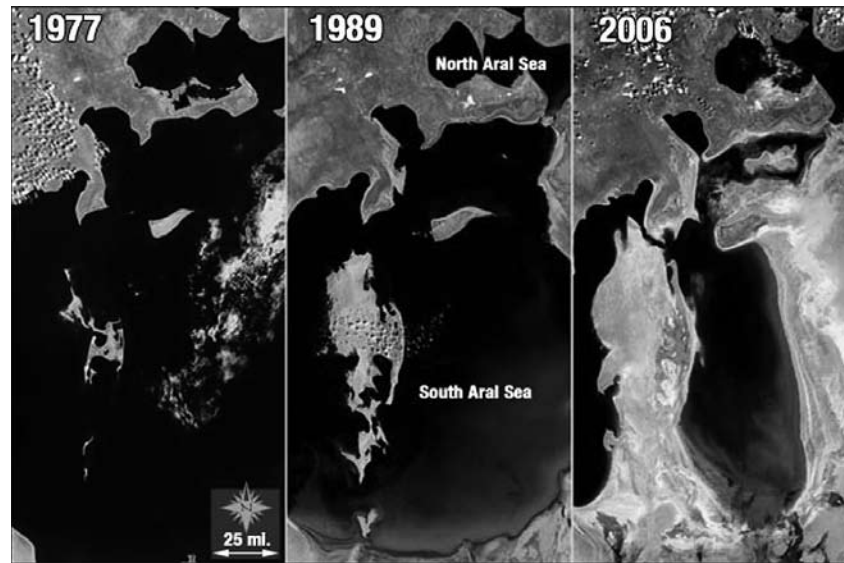
In addition to arguing for protection

of the forest on environmental and subsistence grounds, Chipko activists also argue for protection of forests on cultural grounds. Through religion, folklore, and oral tradition, forests are dedicated to local deities and trees are regarded with great respect as living beings.

Class Discussion Questions

- * Do you consider the right to live in a healthy environment a basic human right? Why or why not?
- * If so, whose responsibility is it to ensure a healthy environment?

Water



The shrinking Aral Sea, NASA, <http://landsat.gsfc.nasa.gov/images/archive/f0012.html>

This is not addressed in the UDHR. In November 2002, the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights issued a non-binding comment affirming that access to water was a human right: "The human right to water is indispensable for leading a life in human dignity. It is a prerequisite for the realization of other human rights."

CONTEMPORARY WATER ISSUES

CENTRAL ASIA The Aral Sea is one of the most visible examples of water mismanagement in the world. Fed by two mighty rivers, the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya, it was once the world's fourth largest lake. Constant irrigation of cotton fields in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan beginning in the 1950s—as an attempt to increase agriculture in the region—reduced inflow from the rivers to a trickle, and today the sea is just one-quarter of its original size. The methods of irrigation (including unlined canals and poor drainage) led to water wastage. Overuse of pesticides and fertilizers on the fields polluted the groundwater. Agricultural development led to population increases, as more people were needed

to work the fields, and more water usage.

The current state of the Aral Sea is critical. As less and less water flows into the sea, the level of the sea has dropped, the overall volume has decreased, and the shoreline has receded. Towns that once stood on the coast are now more than 70 kilometers from the sea. The minerals in the water are more concentrated and salt content (salinity) has increased 400 percent, killing most fish and wildlife; the toxic mix of salt and chemicals from fertilizers has contaminated the drinking water. Strong winds blow the chemicals into the surrounding communities and as far away as the Himalayas. The resulting health problems—cancer, birth defects, anemia, asthma, and drug-resistant tuberculosis—in the region are catastrophic. Although scientists around the world agree that this is an ecological and humanitarian crisis, neither the countries directly involved (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan) nor international agencies (Food and Agriculture Organization, World Bank, Red Cross, among many others) have yet found a satisfactory remedy.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

BOLIVIA Water activist Oscar Olivera wrote, “In Bolivia, we consider water to be a common good—a human right, not a commodity. It is central to life and all that it embraces. It is collective property, yet in another sense it belongs to no one. These ideas, which have their roots in indigenous people’s thinking, are what mobilised working people, both in the countryside and in the cities. The struggle to take control of our water supplies in 2000 became known as the ‘water war’ of Cochabamba.”⁴

In 2000, the Bolivian government, which previously had managed Bolivia’s water supply (much like our water is managed by our city governments) privatized water in the city of Cochabamba, Bolivia’s third largest city. The cost of water increased dramatically, and citizens took to the streets in protest. The demonstrations grew and spread around the country; the government had to declare a state of emergency. In the end, the people won and the multinational company that had bought the water rights lost. The legal battle that followed—over damage claims on both sides—was finally settled in 2006. The battle was over, but the war has not been won. As Oscar Olivera warns, “There are many ways of commercialising water—not only where a public utility is privatised, but also when water is lost, or when it is polluted. Then people must buy bottled drinking water, which costs far more.”

Class Discussion Questions

** Do you think that access to safe water is a fundamental human right? Why or why not?*

** If so, whose responsibility should it be to guarantee safe water?*

Notes

1. Scott Peterson, “Turkey’s Kurds still prepared to fight,” *Christian Science Monitor*, July 9, 2007, World Section, 7.

2. Gigi Douban, “In Egypt’s classrooms, lessons only go so far,” *Christian Science Monitor*, September 21, 2006, World Section, 4.

3. *The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia*, 6th ed. Copyright © 2004, <http://www.infoplease.com/ce6/>.

4. Oscar Olivera, “The voice of the people can dilute corporate power,” *The Guardian*, July 19, 2006.

VOTE WITH YOUR FEET

Taking a Stance (for Real)

This activity is designed to get students out of their seats by having them position themselves physically in the room relative to their answers regarding specific questions. By using space in the classroom, students need to take a position—something they may be less likely to do during a discussion—and they gain a sense of how their position fits with the positions of other students in the class. This exercise also allows the teacher to see how students, even those who are more reticent during discussion, position themselves.

PROCEDURE

1. Designate two places in your room: one that is Agree/Yes, the other Disagree/No.
2. Then ask the students a series of questions about the topic under consideration. Begin with questions that are close to their experience and easily answerable.
3. As the students get comfortable moving around, begin asking more complex questions.
4. You can have students remain silent through the exercise, allowing only their body position to reveal their opinion. Or you can elicit explanations of answers from individual students.
5. Finally, as a way of communicating information about the issue under discussion, you can fill in with facts that are related to the questions asked.

HUMAN RIGHTS STATEMENTS

1. I like going to school.
2. I spend a lot of time doing outdoor activities (e.g., hiking, swimming, biking, playing sports, etc.).
3. I do not worry about having safe, clean drinking water.
4. I regularly go to performances (e.g., concerts, plays, dance recitals, etc.).
5. All children should be able to go to school.
6. The right to clean water should be a guaranteed right of all persons.
7. Everyone should be able to participate in cultural events that happen where they live.
8. We all have the right to live in a clean environment.

EXTENSION OPTIONS

* After students have voted with their feet, they could return to their desks and write out explanations for their answers.

* Students could research issues of interest and run a similar exercise with their classmates.

* Questions could be crafted in a before/after format. Ask before the unit of study and record answers (maybe using a digital camera) and then ask again at the end and compare the two results.

Vote with Your Feet © 2008 Ann D. David; modified by Hemispheres.

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FURTHER READING

Culture

Shiva, Vandana, "The neem—a case history of biopiracy," Third World Network, <http://www.twinside.org.sg/title/pir-ch.htm>

Traditional Ecological Knowledge Prior Art Database, <http://ip.aaas.org/tekindex.nsf/TEKPAD?OpenFrameSet>

Environment

People and Place: Human-Environmental Interactions, Hemispheres curriculum unit, <http://www.utexas.edu/cola/orgs/hemispheres/resources/geography/>

Centro de Educación y Capacitación para el Desarrollo Sustentable (Mexico, in Spanish), <http://www.semarnat.gob.mx/educacionambiental/Pages/inicio.aspx>

Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India* (New Delhi: Zed Press, 1988).

Thomas Weber, *Hugging the Trees: The Story of the Chipko Movement* (New Delhi: Viking Penguin, 1988).

Water

"Contaminated water devastates health across the Aral Sea region," Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, January 27, 1997, <http://www.fao.org/news/1997/970104-e.htm>

Karen Bennett, "Disappearance of the Aral Sea," World Resources Institute, May 23, 2008, <http://www.wri.org/stories/2008/05/disappearance-aral-sea>

"Aral Sea: Where's the beach? Responding to an environmental health disaster in Central Asia," Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), July 09, 2003, http://www.msf.org/msfinternational/invoke.cfm?component=article&objectid=0494DF62-D622-4A36-A6F81F71076AB119&method=full_html

Hemispheres

NEW CURRICULUM UNIT

Restoring Women to World Studies

Hemispheres will introduce our new curriculum unit at the Texas Council for the Social Studies (San Antonio, October 24–26, 2008) and National Council for the Social Studies (Houston, November 14–16, 2008) annual conferences. Please check out our sessions!

The unit, comprising eight case studies that look at women and women's movements in Latin America, the Middle East, Russia, East Europe, Eurasia, and South Asia, soon will be available for download on the Resources page of our Web site: <http://www.utexas.edu/cola/orgs/hemispheres/>

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