

Actors for Change – Reflections and Insights

Chhaya Jha, HURDEC/Nepal and Michelle Parlevliet
chhaya.jha@gmail.com, michelle.parlevliet@gmail.com

I. CONTEXT

This paper discusses an innovative distance learning course, Actors for Change, which positions human rights work as an integral part of conflict prevention. The four-month course, designed and implemented by UNSSC, OHCHR and Fahamu, builds the knowledge and skills of National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) on why they should be involved in conflict prevention and how to mainstream this perspective in their responsibilities. The course has been structured to assist learning by reading, reflecting and doing. The course covers conflict, human rights and a 7-step model of conflict prevention. Since 2005, six courses on conflict prevention were delivered in three languages (English, French and Spanish) to staff of National Institutions in Asia, Africa, Latin America and Europe. This paper is written by the course author and two-time tutor, and the tutor of three courses.

II. COURSE'S DEVELOPMENT AND DELIVERY

A. Design of the course

The course brought together three bodies of work that had been separate till thus far, both institutionally and substantively. The National Institutions Unit of OHCHR supports capacity-building of national human rights institutions (independent bodies established by the state to protect and promote human rights in their national context) and facilitates interaction between such bodies around the world. The United Nations System Staff College has trained UN staff and its partners on early warning and conflict prevention since 1999, using a course developed by UNSSC in partnership with the Conflict Analysis & Dynamics Unit of the London School of Economics. The organization Fahamu had developed much experience with distance learning courses, with particular emphasis on human rights learning for non-governmental organizations in Sub-Saharan Africa. The Actors for Change course combines the expertise of these three institutions, by focusing on conflict prevention (UNSSC emphasis) for and by national institutions (OHCHR audience) through distance learning (Fahamu experience). A fourth perspective, focusing on the relationship between human rights and conflict management and developed at the Centre for Conflict Resolution (Cape Town), provided the 'glue' between these three areas of expertise.

Starting points for the design of the course were the contents of the UNSSC training course and the methodology developed by Fahamu in other distance learning courses. This meant that the course would consist of a period of self-study (using a CD-ROM and supported by web-based discussions involving all and direct tutor-participant interaction), a face-to-face workshop, and further individual work with a final assignment. The EWPM course provided a basic framework in terms of concepts and tools for enhancing conceptual clarity and analytical skills for identifying conflict causes and appropriate preventive measures. In-depth knowledge of NHRIs, based on the author's previous work with NHRIs in African countries, was used to augment this framework and enhance the course contents, including its relevance; additional analytical and strategic tools were integrated to enhance the depth and comprehensiveness of the learning. The course seeks to pre-empt certain perceptions that might hold institutions back from letting their staff engage with the subject matter of the course, such as possible reluctance to engage in conflict related issues, due to fear of jeopardizing the institution's relationship with the state (in many cases its sole funder.) Two other ideas informed the course design: the recognition that NIs have limited human, financial and institutional resources to expend on new ideas, methodologies, and processes, and the need for the course to be contextual and practical, so as to be effective for people with heavy workloads. This implied that the course was written in a conversational style using accessible language, various examples, and many exercises; and, especially, practical assignments directly relevant to the participants' contexts and work responsibilities.

Key messages of the course

The course emphasizes some key messages:

- Issues of justice are key in understanding contemporary conflict, in that the absence of justice, participation, and security are central to people's experience of poverty and deprivation, laying the foundation for violent conflict.
- Interventions should not only focus on manifestations or symptoms of violent conflict but must address the structural causes and underlying, systemic, conditions fuelling violent conflict.

- Non-traditional actors can play important roles in addressing and preventing conflict, including civil society organizations and national institutions.
- Proper analysis, careful planning, relationship-building and creative thinking are essential to recognise conflict and peace-building factors and to design effective preventive measures.

B. Course delivery

The course follows a combination of different methodologies, including interactive exercises on CDROM; web-based interactions between participants and tutors; practical assignments; and a workshop. In the first ten weeks of the 16-week course, the learning is through weekly studying of chapters, email discussions on concepts and issues, and assignments to be completed before the face-to-face workshop in Week 11. During this period, the focus is on building understanding about conflict and conflict prevention; why these are relevant for NIs; and on enhancing skills for conflict analysis, strategy development and identifying preventive measures. Much attention is also devoted to sharing experiences between participants through questions on the CDROM and practical exercises. The workshop allows participants and tutors to interact in person and to explore issues and skills that can be less easily conveyed through distance learning, such as communication and negotiation skills, etc. After the workshop, participants focus on preparing a prevention plan for their own institution as their final assignment.

Neither of the tutors involved in the first delivery of the course had engaged in distance learning before, though both had extensive experience as facilitators and trainers. This meant that they were not hemmed in by notions of 'this is how it should be done' but were instead able to develop a way of working with one another and participants that made sense to them as a solid learning experience. Key in this was ongoing communication with the participants and between the tutors. Regular and clear dialogue, extensive coordination between tutors to facilitate clarity and a common approach, setting clear standards for providing feedback and for grading assignments, became very important elements for the smooth running of the course. In recognition of the need to build rapport with participants and of the challenge of doing so over distance, the tutors made great efforts to push and pull participants along in the process. At times, time management problems and resource constraints meant that participants were unable to focus fully on the course, even if they were fully committed. This made it all the more necessary for the tutors to assist them, providing counseling and mentoring support to assist their completion of the course.

The tutors also divided the tasks amongst themselves to facilitate the process and enable the tutors to cope with the rigorous demands of the course without feeling overburdened. Tutors took turns in 'facilitating' the weekly web-based discussions. Participants were divided amongst the two tutors so that each tutor focused on half of the participants. Tasks and principles for the tutors included: weekly introductions of the focus for the week and summaries at the end of comments by participants; encouraging participants to contribute to discussions; allowing participants to discuss issues amongst themselves before contributing inputs but clarify if required to maintain technical robustness; be flexible about deadlines, but not too flexible so as to keep the course moving forward; and provide thorough feedback on assignments. (To ensure standardization, tutors developed scoring sheets for grading assignments and email discussions. These were refined in successive courses.)

Fahamu, which has handled distance-learning courses, commended the tutoring as being of the highest quality and most consistent tutoring they had ever experienced. Initially, technical issues created practical problems in course delivery, which had to be addressed on an ad hoc basis. Many participants faced difficulties in completing tasks on time or participating in the email discussions due to extensive workload and limited institutional support. (Despite formal commitment of support from senior management of the institutions, participants' workload was seldom adjusted.) Some, especially in Asia and Africa, also faced electricity, computer and internet access problems which challenged the course delivery.

II. STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED

Strengths

The strengths of the course lie in its contents, methodology, tutoring, and institutional support. The content is very thorough, treating human rights and conflict prevention not in isolation, but as an intertwined reality. The useful combination of concepts, tools and practical skills means that participants greatly internalize key messages. With its emphasis on sharing and exchanging ideas, the course methodology enables high quality learning. The knowledge shared of different contexts and experiences by participants broadens perspectives and exposure to new issues (e.g. participants from Afghanistan shared about social

conditions and constraints faced by certain groups in their context, which was new for African participants and prompted their reflection on their own national context.)

The tutors' consistent guidance ensures technical quality assurance and emotional support to participants burdened by too many pressures. The significant content knowledge and practical experience of tutors helped discussions to be technically rich and realistic. The course also provides participants with opportunities to enhance other skills, not related to conflict prevention, such as the value of distance-learning for communication; exposure to different training methodologies; proper planning and time management.

In successive courses, the course contents, methodology and process were refined to improve quality standards. The institutional back-up of OHCHR, FAHAMU and especially UNSSC created financial and human resource conditions for course implementation in three languages. Good practice was institutionalized by the UNSSC's preparation of a Tutors Manual. Later on, a full-time Associate Expert from UNSSC working on the course ensured regular follow-up with participants and additional support to tutors. Such constant follow-up on submission of assignments and other issues allowed 'borderline' participants to complete the course and not drop out. The full-time person also facilitated stronger institutional buy-in from NIs; he could maintain contact with supervisors and Commissioners.

Challenges

Key challenges throughout the six courses were institutional buy-in to enable participants to make time for course requirements and limited willingness on the part of the NIs to accept the final prevention plans as plans for further development by the institution. (Where this did happen, the opportunities for mainstreaming conflict prevention in the human rights work were many – see below.) Another challenge was of a paradigmatic nature: NIs generally understand the business of promoting and protecting human rights as handling rights-related complaints. Operating primarily reactively, they find it difficult to recognize (and operationalise) the importance of addressing systemic conditions in society that cause human rights violations, even though this is essential for rights protection and contributes to conflict prevention. With NIs not recognizing conflict prevention as a direct part of their mandate, it was difficult to get the institutional ownership that was necessary for participants to use the course effectively and for the implementation of their final plan.

The different levels of understanding and skills amongst participants meant that some could grasp concepts quickly and present analysis and arguments of high quality, while others were unable to do so. This was often due to different educational levels and language proficiency; for this reason tutors decided to focus on the ideas in the assignment and not on language. Time management proved difficult for both participants and tutors, especially as participants requested extensions for submission of assignments while tutors had to process the whole group within a certain time-frame.

At times, socio-political developments in the participants' countries or institutions affected participants' ability to engage with the course and complete their assignments; such situations took precedence as issues had to be addressed immediately. (For example, organizational restructuring of the New Zealand NI interfered with participants' ability to keep up with the course; in Nepal, one participant had to leave his work station for a period of time to address incidents related to the Maoist-insurgency.) While these situations affected participants' focus, they also meant that participants shared direct experiences of what was going on in their environment which heightened the practical relevance and meaning of the course.

III. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF NETWORKING

The courses have created tremendous networking opportunities for all involved: NIs, participants and tutors. The email discussion, sharing of views and web-based feedback creates a forum where personal relationships are established, and understanding is enhanced about the functioning of different institutions and their context, prompting ideas about improving institutional performance. For many participants the workshop was their first opportunity to travel abroad. A few participants used the course to enroll in higher studies related to conflict and peace, and/or embark on new career paths. For example, following a chance meeting with a military commander in charge of a Peace Support Training Centre that trains peacekeepers from around the world, a Kenyan participant is now a trainer on conflict and human rights at this Centre. She has also started providing training for the Rwandan Military Academy on human rights in disarmament, demobilization and reintegration.

UNSSC has created a web-based learning platform connecting the 98 participants from all six courses, enabling them to learn from each other and be updated on personal achievements and progress.

IV CONTRIBUTION TO SOCIAL CHANGE

Addressing human rights is a tool for social change. The courses helped participants and NIs realize that NIs can play a critical role in facilitating social change. NIs have certain comparative advantages - being a legitimate and credible institution, being impartial and neutral and having access from policy to community levels in a country – which can greatly contribute to addressing conditions of discrimination and vulnerability which create unequal access to political, economic and social resources and processes. By recognizing and addressing such systemic issues, NIs can be powerful in addressing structural and deep-rooted causes of potential conflict.

Some participants have taken their learning from the course forward within their own context. They have attempted to broaden the understanding of other relevant stakeholders about the issues.

Selected examples of the Course Application

In **Kenya**, a promising prevention plan by one participant was turned into an institutional project where the Commission, the police, the Ministry of Agriculture and the local warring communities were connected through human rights education focusing on rights based approaches to development. This has created a forum – essentially a neutral ground to discuss conflict prevention - where farmers now approach the police on issues related to agriculture and livestock, and work together in peace communities and on development projects. Following the involvement of the first two participants on the course, the Kenyan Commission has now facilitated 13 more staff members to take part in the course so that there is a critical mass within the institution that can take conflict prevention further. One participant attributes the active and outspoken stance of the Commission in relation to the recent elections to the institution's increased awareness of its role in conflict prevention.

In **Philippines**, a project was implemented (designed in the context of the course) to strengthen, amongst others, the Barangay Human Rights Action Center. Training was conducted for local government (barangay) officials and was combined with a medical mission (a strategy used as entry point). All officials signed up as Barangay Human Rights Action Officers (BHRAOs); a commitment was also made to include honoraria for these BHRAOs in next year's local government budget. These BHRAOs are tasked to link grassroots communities to the Philippines NI in terms of reporting of violations of human rights; the NI will also empower them to become more vigilant about their rights.

Distance Learning Tools and Possible Contribution to Social Justice

The user-friendly technology allowing students to learn at their own pace using CDROMs with quality assurance and standards, has immense scope for addressing literacy issues in countries like Nepal (where both authors of this paper are based.) Despite extensive Government efforts, the literacy rate of women of six years and above is only 42.5 percent with high dropout rates at lower and higher secondary levels. These are caused by social issues like mobility constraints for girls, need for girls' labour at home, lack of physical facilities like toilets, early marriage and pregnancy. While the long-term objective of gender equality and social justice is to change Nepal's social structure so that girls get equal opportunities as boys, the existing constraints cannot be removed easily since value-systems and societal attitudes need to change. Hence it is necessary to adopt innovative strategies to reach girls confined to the private domain. The correct investment of modern technology like computers can provide learning opportunities to people who have until now been denied access.

In existing schools, distance-learning technology provides great opportunities for improving the quality of learning. Due to the poor conditions in rural areas, schools often remain without teachers or with poor quality teachers. The methodology and process used in the Actors for Change course (adapted for the Nepali context), can make a big difference as high quality inputs can be provided through CDROMs and online tutoring. With possible new schemes like one laptop per child, children excluded due to multiple barriers, can be provided guidance and inputs which they would not access otherwise. The CDROMs also provide good reference materials, which are usually beyond the means of schools in Nepal. Thus, distance learning has immense potential to address issues of social justice, if the appropriate enabling environment is created by policy makers and implementers.

V. CONCLUSION

The Actors for Change course has been a great learning opportunity for all involved. Experience has indicated that this methodology can really build capacity. The discussion forum provides a safe environment to express opinions while the tutors provide key insights through discussions and graded assignments, contributing to a high standard of learning.

The user-friendly technology and quality assurance makes this methodology replicable for providing courses to children and adults in less developed countries, who are deprived of a good education for various reasons. This will enable them and others experiencing exclusion, to learn despite prevailing discrimination, thus contributing to the overall improvement of human development and achievement of international development goals.