

## **Best practices relating to the training of NGO activists and on establishing linkages among NGOs: A contribution of the Icelandic Center for Human Rights (ICEHR, Reykjavik)**

### *Establishing linkages among NGOs*

In Iceland we have a long standing tradition of women's organisations working together. We were quick to find out that in unity there is strength and by putting our differences aside and focusing on our common goals we could further our cause. This is a large reason for Iceland being on the top of the Gender Gap Index for the past thirteen years.

An example of women's organisations working together is the Women's Strike which was first held in 1975 (women walked out of their workplaces when they had reached the average salaries of men, which at that time was more than three hours before the women should have finished work). The event has been repeated regularly ever since.

More and more organisations working for specific causes or on human rights and the rights of marginalised groups, such as right to education, adequate standard of living, and other rights for all regardless of race, origin, age, disability, sexual orientation, sexual identity and other factors, have followed the Women's Movement and started working together for a common cause.

A fairly recent example is the Children's Rights Watch which consists of many organisations promoting children's rights, such as Save the Children Iceland, the Icelandic Red Cross, the Disability Alliance, the Icelandic Human Rights Centre, the National Association of People with Intellectual Disabilities and more.

Collaboration/cooperation allows NGOs to gain greater influence and power and achieve better outcomes than they would be able to do on their own. They should:

- strive for partnerships
- take their time to approach partners and to build up trust
- be flexible, ready to compromise and respect the interests of the other partners.

To find common ground, each association must familiarise itself with the operations of other organisations working for the same or similar goals. If they see that they are working from the same premisses they should be in touch, organise a common meeting for discussing collaboration/cooperation. Of course, the organisation's objectives and needs must always be kept in mind when considering a partnership.

There are also more than one model to partnerships, such as cooperative, collaborative or integrated models of partnership. In most instances a partnership agreement would be preferable, for example to identify issues, causes, solutions, map actors and partners and choose a model of partnership.

An arrangement for collaboration/cooperation should be based on shared and compatible goals, either a wide goal or specific objectives, agreed between two or more organisations. This could be informal networking/information sharing to full joint collaboration/cooperation. This could include seminars, conferences, publications,

collaboration with comments on law bills and additional reports to international supervisory bodies etc.

### *Training of NGO activists*

As to education and training for NGO activists, the most important thing is a human rights approach.

NGO activists should:

- be well informed about the human rights of the group they are working for as well as human rights in general, that they are universal and unalienable.
- be taught to respect the human rights of others, individuals and groups alike. In fact, the importance of human rights education can not be stressed enough.
- be taught organisation and advocacy for the rights of their target group or the cause they are working for, to attempt to bring about change.

The change which NGO activists try to bring about could be in policies and laws, in the implementation of these policies or laws or in people's awareness of the policies and their own rights.

The training should include methods for presenting evidence and arguments as to why change should happen, as well as to ensure a clear insight into what the problem is, who is affected and in what ways, underlying causes and who is responsible.

NGO activists should have clear insight into their goals, the desired long-term result of their advocacy actions and their objectives, short-or medium-term changes they expect to be able to achieve which help them reach their goal.

In all their work they must:

- learn to be specific, say what they mean
- set measurable goals and be as exact as possible, include numbers (of people, organisations, frequencies, test cases etc)
- set achievable objectives and state them in such a way that they and others will know when they have achieved them. The goal might be a change in legislation but the objective should state, what, when, where, who and how
- learn to set realistic objectives which should be achievable in their planned timeframe within the limits of the capacity of their organisation, and
- learn also to include a clear, realistic timeframe within which the proposed change should be achieved.

NGO activists should:

- understand the role of media as a means for the voices of vulnerable groups to be heard and as an engagement mechanism for social change
- be able to identify basic elements of a communication strategy for NGOs and a process by which an organisation presents information to affect public opinion

- be able to address policy makers on topics related to their cause, with the NGOs acting as senders and the general public and the various target groups, as recipients
- be able to recognise the sensitivity of the issue at hand and choose the moment and the venue for disseminating and distinguishing information in public interest and information interesting to the public.

In addition, NGO activists must understand the role of the NGO community in monitoring and assessment carried out by other actors (public and private bodies, academia etc.). They must also learn about strategic monitoring, which could be defined as planned and systematic investigation of a selected fragment of social reality in order to find out more fully about a particular issue. All this coupled with experience and enthusiasm counts for an outstanding NGO activist.