

Education on Child Rights in Sri Lanka

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Until recently, work on human rights in Sri Lanka was confined to a few intellectuals and the legal community in Colombo. It was completely new in rural society. The grass-roots were unaware of human rights. Protests and demonstrations against violations of human rights were only remedial measures, not preventive steps. Believing in a positive approach to this issue, grass-root human rights education programs started to teach target groups about how human rights affect society, how they are violated, and what remedies are available to prevent violations.

Janodaya Sajeewana Kendraya (JSK, Animating Centre for Awakening the People) is at the forefront of human rights education. A registered non-governmental organization, it organizes grass-root communities and strengthens them to free themselves from all forms of social, economic, political, spiritual, and cultural oppression. JSK has the following objectives:

- Promote self-help activities to reduce poverty and improve the access of target families to state services.
- Develop institutions and strengthen community-based and people's organizations.
- Establish networks with other organizations engaged in development activities.
- Provide training, technical assistance, consultancy, and other services to urban and rural men and women to equip them with skills in undertaking income-generating ventures.

Community Organizing

JSK started to work among 1,200 low-income squatter families in the Muthurajawela, a marshy wetland between Colombo and Negombo, a large coastal town on the west coast. With an area of 3,100 hectares, most of it was state property and unoccupied.

JSK championed the cause of these settlers, prevented their eviction, and organized them into the Muthurajawela United People's Organisation (MUPO). It has become well-organized and well-disciplined, and a replicable model for grass-root organizations.

JSK extended its animation program to other areas. New people's organizations were started on the MUPO model. Besides MUPO, several people's organizations work as JSK's partners: Jaela United People's Organisation (JUPO, 1996), Gampaha United People's Organization (GAMUPO, 1997), and Kadawatha United People's Organization (KADUPO, 1997).

Composed of base groups of mainly women representing their families, they have common programs for mini banks, consumers, social security, income generation, children, libraries, health, and culture.

The most important is the consumer program, which strengthens community groups to overcome the rising cost of living by distributing essential consumer goods at a very low price.

In 1996, JSK created the Human Rights Community Education Centre. It was inspired by the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education (1995–2004) and works in conjunction with the Centre for the Study of Human Rights (CSHR) of University of Colombo to educate

the rural community on human rights. The center also conducts the following programs:

The *Youth Program* was introduced to attract school leavers to get involved in human rights activities. Issues taken up under this program included discussions on:

- challenges faced by the youth and how to overcome them,
- issues arising from consumption of liquor and drugs and how to overcome them,
- law and peace, and
- responsibilities of the youth.

The *Students Program* was conducted to create awareness among the students about human rights and achieve peace in schools as all students learn to respect each other's rights.

The *Children and Child Abuse Program* raises awareness of child rights among adults. Activities were organized along with sexual health programs to counter increasing incidence of child abuse, gross violations of child rights, and exploitation of child labor.

Children lack legislative protection against violence and abuse. They become victims due to poverty and ignorance of their own rights. They are lured into offering sex for money.

To carry out human rights education in schools, JSK prepared a two-year school education project (August 1998 to July 2000). The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) approved the funds for the project in selected schools in Gampaha, in the Western Province of Sri Lanka.

CIDA Project

The project was comprised of the following:

The *Legal Education Course* provides skills to enable people to access and communicate with the relevant authorities.

The *Training Program on Human Rights* seeks to promote a human rights culture among students and develop school leaders so that students would begin to understand how they could protect themselves.

Ten students from five schools at a time were trained. The training was repeated in five other schools every six weeks. Follow-up programs were arranged with students to promote human rights awareness in school activities, including celebration of Human Rights Day, poster competitions, essay competitions, etc.

Workshops were held on human rights and other issues (elections, child labor, free trade zone workers, labor regulations, etc.).

Content of the school programs included the following:

- *Child rights.* Why children have rights to compulsory basic education, basic health care, and parental protection.
- *Media education.* How to be free from media indoctrination.
- *Child abuse.* What is it, and how can children protect themselves.

These programs were carried out in schools in the four educational regions of Gampaha—Negombo, Gampaha, Kelaniya, and Minuwangoda. They were conducted once in two months for 50 students from five schools. These students carried out their own programs for parents and elders and talked of child rights at weekly school assemblies.

In two years, the JSK school education project was carried out in 65 schools:

<i>Educational Region</i>	<i>No. of Schools</i>	<i>No. of Participants</i>	
		<i>Students</i>	<i>Teachers</i>
Gampaha	10	100	10
Minuwangoda	10	100	10
Negombo	20	200	20
Kelaniya	25	250	25
Total	65	650	65

One-day human rights education sessions were conducted in a centrally situated school for five schools at a time, repeated in other areas at the end of every six weeks, for students 14 years and above (Year 8–Year 11).

There are 555 schools in the Gampaha district administered at the district level, and five

national schools directly administered by the central government. The regional directors of the four educational regions welcomed the JSK's school-based human rights program. Some school principals were not very encouraging and showed little interest, but students and teachers said the program suited them.

After the JSK awareness program on human rights, forums on child rights awareness were formed in schools. Students spoke on human rights at the weekly student assemblies. Some school forums organized awareness programs and workshops for fellow students on drugs and child abuse. School principals allowed students to hold follow-up meetings. Some principals even participated, thus encouraging these activities.

Materials used in the programs included the following:

- Universal Declaration of Human Rights;
- Convention on the Rights of the Child;
- International Labour Organization documents;
- Manual of Child Protection Authority regarding child abuse;
- *Human Rights Education Kit for Sri Lankan Trainers* published by the Asia Foundation;
- *Human Rights Initiative, Human Rights, Duties and Democracy* published by Asia Foundation; and
- *Human Rights Education Kit for Sri Lankan Schools* published by the CSHR, University of Colombo.

Topics covered by the program are the following:

- importance of studying human rights,
- economic rights,
- today's child—challenges and remedies,
- laws relating to children,
- religion and human rights,
- child workers and child domestic workers,
- reconciliation board (functions),
- functions of the divisional secretariat,
- laws relating to births and marriages,
- child abuse, and
- media and how to be free from media indoctrination.

Commitment to the promotion of child rights demands not only good intentions and fine declarations but also full association with those who are struggling to develop a culture of human rights. With this goal, JSK embarked on its school program on human rights with special attention to child rights.

JSK thus helped create a culture of human rights among school children. JSK developed student leaders so that they would begin to understand how they could protect themselves from child rights violations using a positive approach.

Social Impact

JSK not only created awareness among children about their own rights, but also delivered the message to the community through the school children. Parents and society have now started reacting to child rights violations. Complaints to the police have increased and many cases of child abuse have been filed in the magistrate courts.

Students and teachers had received the same training and followed the same awareness programs. Although JSK is successful, it has a problem of program continuity as the students graduate. JSK has no funds to continue the training program beyond the donor-assisted two-year period, which ended in July 2000.

With CIDA's assistance, JSK has brought the message of human rights to remote villages and schools. However, human rights education programs in schools need more organizing at the upper levels. Groups are guided by selected teachers. Students' knowledge must be enhanced and more leaders must be trained. New members have to be recruited in order not to disrupt group formation. Teachers without human rights training find it difficult to train new students and to continue the school programs. The teachers themselves ask for advance training.

School groups need field experience. They must go on rural fact-finding missions and conduct rural environment and human rights studies. These field experiences will be vital in follow-up programs.

Training programs must be expanded to cover new areas. School libraries must be provided books on human rights, and special sessions must be held to evaluate and assess the findings of the outdoor activities of school groups.

Human rights have been introduced recently into the school curriculum. The zone directors of education have formally approved the human rights education program in schools, and principals do not interfere. However, the zone directors, principals, and teachers have no basic knowledge or understanding of human rights. JSK has thus prepared follow-up programs to brief them through workshops and awareness programs.

Follow-up Programs

Program 1: Workshops

The workshop for the six zone directors and the principals and teachers of selected schools in Gampaha seeks to raise awareness on the importance of education for peace, human rights, and democracy as endorsed and advocated by the General Conference of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

Even though zone directors allow human rights education programs in schools, principals lack an understanding of them and are reluctant to form school groups. The groups that JSK formed are very active, but they need legal recognition. This proposed workshop aims to develop strong communication and hierarchical links with the state educational authorities of Gampaha.

Workshop participants will have the opportunity to comment and to recommend some improvements on the educational programs proposed for the schools. JSK would be able to gain the required legitimacy within the educational community, which would finally lead to acquiring the official mandate from the state educational authorities to implement the program with greater efficiency and effectiveness.

Program 2: Training of trainers in human rights education in Gampaha district schools

Since there is no program to train teachers as human rights trainers, JSK is compelled to start training-of-trainers programs to ensure the continuity of the students' school forums. These programs will be organized and conducted in close collaboration with the CSHR of the University of Colombo. JSK belongs to the network of human rights organizations sponsored by this center. Four JSK staff members have been trained as trainers by the Legal Aid Consortium of Sri Lanka. Through this program, JSK hopes to train teachers to improve the capability of school groups to continue by themselves the human rights education work.

Program 3: Fieldwork

This program aims to help students gain field experience in environmental rights, child rights, child development, development and human rights, and democracy and human rights. In past programs, students received only theoretical knowledge of human rights. Students need practical programs to enhance their school activities and to understand the link between theory and practice of human rights.

Conclusion

JSK has successfully carried out a well-planned two-year work program on human rights with CIDA funds. This is meant to be an ongoing program with broad-based new activities to train students in school. Results are positive and encouraging, but JSK lacks funds to implement the proposed follow-up work program. JSK looks forward to a donor to help carry out the second phase of the proposed program and complete the human rights education programs in schools.