BOOK AND MEDIA REVIEWS

Problem-posing HRE: a revolutionary tool for social change and human development

Cislaghi, Beniamino. (2018). *Human Rights and Community-led Development: Lessons from Tostan.* Edinburgh: University Press. 287 pp. US$ 85.60 (hardcover): ISBN: 9781474419796; US$ 107.26 (ebook) ISBN: 978147441981.

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This book examines key concepts related to human rights education (HRE) and development in Africa. It challenges the assumptions of universal concepts of human rights, development, the westernization of human rights and aid. There is an obvious relevance to this approach, given that the aims and the manner of international aid are subject to intense debate not only in academia, but amongst practitioners throughout the world. Criticism of "top down projects" and their apparent disregard for local values and their role in human development are frequently linked to hidden structures of power and colonialist ideals. Ben Cislaghi offers a practical model of human development, drawing on the approaches of Sen, Nussbaum, and Appadurai. Expanding cross-cultural development theory, the author envisages local people at the centre of the development process, leading and holding ultimate accountability for outcomes. There is also an understanding of education as an essential part of human development. For this purpose, the book is based on research that analyses the work of an NGO called Tostan, which, since 1984, has been working with human rights from a perspective of community empowerment in West African countries. Such work has focused on the existing local cultural values of rural communities and has been conducted by staff members who have largely come from the same countries where they have worked. The book aims to fill a gap in HRE literature by presenting rigorous ethnographic research focused on the causal pathways around HRE that lead to social change.

This well-organized book has three parts. Part I offers reflections on rethinking development practices, and this section includes the potential challenges of HRE in development initiatives, as well as the concept of modernization at work. This discussion focuses on Tostan's work with the Fulɓe ethnic group in Senegal. Cislaghi suggests a third and alternative point of view to the dichotomy that considers human rights as either a result of a global awakening or as a western product. Such an alternative view accepts the applicability of human rights to non-western communities when their members are given the means to translate human rights into the terms of their own social values and norms. HRE plays a key role in this process, given that it provides practitioners with a model to help people develop local understandings of international human rights. After reviewing historical aspects of HRE, Cislaghi defends the view that HRE should be a liberating process,

rather than fostering a "cultural human rights dictatorship". The author adopts Paulo Freire's concepts to suggest that HRE should allow students to view, understand and criticize human rights from the perspective of their local reality. Such an approach is based on two foundations: it allows an understanding of the power relations involved in the educational process, and it allows subjects to analyse social problems that matter to them and find moral-political solutions that can result in social change. The author suggests a human development framework for HRE, which should be centred in the development of freedoms and capabilities as the main goals of human development. HRE can assist local communities to decide by themselves the direction of their own development through social construction of the status quo.

Cislaghi uses the above framework as a model to analyse social change dynamics linked to HRE classes and the human development of the members of the Fulɓe . The author provides brief and relevant information about human rights and related issues in Senegal, such as gender distribution of the population, the country's ethnic diversity and how human rights legislation is incorporated into Senegalese law. Gender inequality is a major issue for both Senegal and its many ethnic groups, including the Fulɓe. Other social practices that are inconsistent with human rights are also explored, such as female genital mutilation, child labour and child/forced marriage. Tostan's *Community Empowerment Programme* covers several human rights-related topics, and it encourages participants to be critical and to participate actively. These HRE activities are based on participants' individual experiences and include group discussions, songs and poetry, role play, and theatre. Part I ends with a description of Fulɓe social practices and beliefs.

In Part II, Cislaghi gives an account of the Tostan HRE programme in action. The author describes the village before the programme and the outcomes of HRE activities. He describes the West African village's social system and the invisible power structures that undermine women's access to decision-making processes and therefore hinder their development opportunities. Child and forced marriage, as well as child labour, are other social practices that are considered inconsistent with human rights. The author then extensively describes the Tostan HRE Programme, and how it focuses on getting participants to proactively engage in activities and consider their local experiences. Cislaghi highlights the positive aspect of having educators that are members of the same local community. Participants are male and female, although women are frequently signed up by their husbands without even knowing about the existence of the programme in the village. Classes are interactive and democratic and held in the participants' mother tongue. The author describes the several changes observed in the village that result from the Tostan programme. Participants showed greater self-awareness and gender equality aspirations. Other human rights inconsistencies previously observed seemed to have been reflected upon.

In Part III, Cislaghi offers a model for indirect development practitioners, by referring to how HRE has led to social change processes in the village. By linking the main concepts and theories addressed in the book, the author concludes that the pedagogy used by Tostan, coupled with the subject of the programme (human rights), has resulted in a number of outcomes: participants have achieved community empowerment and the ability to avoid repeating past practices; social change has been driven through enhanced and shared perceptions of their own realities, from a human rights perspective.

As a human rights teacher and practitioner, I find Cislaghi's (2018) book an inspiring work. The author's critical view of HRE as a development tool that neither conceives the subject (human rights) as an "imposed given" by westernized power structures nor as a "one size fits all" solution is probably the highlight of this book. Paulo Freire's pedagogical theory is one of the main bridges that covers the academic gap from the dichotomy between the most common views of human rights either being conceived, as the author puts it, as a global awakening or as a western product. Whether in law, sociology, education, or international development, this book encourages us to support HRE as a development tool that enables non-western communities to make sense of human rights from the standpoint of their own values, needs and experiences.