

Some information about Martha Meijer

Martha Meijer is an independent human rights advisor with a special interest in Indonesia, impunity and human rights impact assessment. She has used different methods of working: research, capacity enhancement and training, and evaluations. Here is an overview of her experience in the field.

1. Research

Research is one of my favourite activities. I enjoy digging into human rights situations, identifying possible interventions for improvement, and measuring the effects these interventions, expected or unexpected, might have.

Human rights is always about people, about their dignity and perspectives for developing their capabilities. There is a lot of theory in the international system of human rights, but the main focus should, in my opinion, always be the ways that people can enjoy their rights.

A long time ago, a group of Albanian Kosovar human rights activists asked me, which right was being violated when they were not allowed to bury their dead in the way and with the rituals they had done for centuries. They were convinced there was a right being violated, but which one? We checked the international standards and concluded that it was the right to participate in the cultural life of your own choice. Thus their very basic feeling had found a legal, theoretical argument.

My research can go into different directions: it may be a theoretical effort to develop a model for analysis, or the concrete and current situation of human rights in a country that I know sufficiently well. But I do not believe in a one-week reading, one-week reporting formula. I know where to find the basic data, but I also want to build upon earlier experiences.

Other research - much more participatory - will go into conducting needs assessments for human rights activities. Then the stakeholders are my partners in creating a problem tree or a theory of change.

Below are a few examples of assignments that included a certain amount of research:

For the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Policy and Operations Evaluation Department (IOB): the assignment was, based on a set of criteria to select a limited number of human rights programmes and projects of the Dutch government for a major evaluation of its total human rights interventions - originating from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Dutch Ministry for Development Cooperation in the period 2004 - 2010. The selection of two dozen programmes out of more than 600 had to be based on (among others): contents (what right did they intervene in); geography (what countries were involved); volume (in financial terms); timeline (start, conclusion and length).

We made a selection that covered in a more or less representative manner the priorities, regions, big and small, long and short term, and ongoing and ad hoc types of the interventions. The evaluation

for which this selection was made, will be carried out in 2011. I carried out this assignment with a colleague-consultant Margreet de Boer in the period between October 2010 to February 2011.

In 2008, for the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs Gender Unit: the assignment was to develop a reporting scheme and indicators for a sound accountability to the Dutch Parliament of interventions aimed at Violence Against Women in several countries. These programmes were initiated under the umbrella of the "Schokland Agreements", a series of tri-partite cooperation programmes among government, civil society and the private sector. The innovative programmes required a new way of reporting. We took the United Nations objectives of the fight against Violence Against Women as a starting point for developing a three level reporting tool (objectives, chosen priorities and achievements). Ministry of Foreign Affairs staff members adapted the tool into a special reporting module for embassies. This assignment was carried out in cooperation with Margreet de Boer who also developed a similar tool for NGOs (see Rights for Change).

In 2005, I devoted a sabbatical semester to analysing and describing mechanisms of impunity in Indonesia. This made me aware that research is not an objective in itself but a means to contribute to more effective and innovative ways of thinking that can be used in the real world. In 2006, I organized a workshop with Indonesian human rights activists, and asked them for feed-back. One of the major outcomes of this workshop was that there is a need for better definitions as to impunity, and especially for the inclusion of violations of social and economic rights for which international prosecution should become possible.

The resulting book (The Scope of Impunity), although by now a bit out of date, was one of my major research projects, and I am very proud that there is an Indonesian translation available to Indonesian activists: "Jangkauan Impunitas di Indonesia", with a foreword by the late Asmara Nababan. (photo © VHRmedia)

When in 2011 I led a workshop for the Swedish Evaluation Agency SADEV, to develop a sound methodology for the overarching human rights evaluation of the work of SIDA, I decided to note down my experiences, and to make further steps for a smart tool to measure human rights realization, based on United Nations' concepts. It was published in: "Issues that matter. Mensenrechten, minderheden en migranten; Liber Amicorum prof. mr. R. Fernhout." Wolf Publishers 2013 (<http://www.ru.nl/rechten/cmr/@926485/pagina/>).

2. Capacity enhancement and training

Capacity enhancement of human rights organisations is, in my opinion, a combination of research, developing strategies and training. I have found it very inspiring to work together with a human rights organisation in building their practical skills, underlying knowledge and learning capacity.

Change comes from within. Capacity strengthening or enhancement of the effectiveness of human rights groups inside the country where they work is, therefore, of utmost importance. They are the actors for change.

With projects related to capacity enhancement, it has repeatedly struck me how universal the problems of organisations are. We recognize each other's problems and can discuss possible solutions. I remember the recognition of a group of women from an Indonesian women's organization in Jombang, East Java, when I told them about similar issues in strategic planning that I had encountered in Kosova.

In Kosova I managed a two year project (with funds from Hivos) for capacity strengthening of the Council for Defense of Human Rights and Freedoms. The aim was to integrate digital documentation in their work. Several activists in small villages got the opportunity to use the computer, not only for their necessary communication, but also for registering human rights violations in digital software that facilitated analysis and oversight. I will never forget the kinds of computers I saw, the broad calloused fingers of the local activist who typed in the information, so that the totals appeared on the screen in Prishtina.

Even more intensive were the contacts with the women in Jombang, who, notwithstanding their orthodoxy and veiled appearance, were enthusiast and outgoing in their fight against domestic violence and other types of violence against women. They were appalled when the then right wing local government in Jombang made it impossible for women to be outside their homes after nine o'clock at night. "If the men were forbidden to go out in the streets, there wouldn't be any problem anymore!", they said. Orthodox but progressive, they taught the female pupils of the pesantren (Islamic boarding school), what their rights were. We never openly discussed to what extent the girls experienced violations of their rights or violence within the school. That was too intimate for them. But these lessons were very necessary, they said.

In many of my training activities I have used a certain amount of general information on human rights as a basis. I find it useful not to go into too much detail for participants in order for them to grab the main thinking, and to be able to apply it in their daily work.

I have gathered a lot of experience in training human rights activists in how they can become more effective in their work, discussing with them what should have priority, which strategy is most appropriate and how to monitor their own effectiveness. These discussions require practical skills as well as information and basic theory. The combination is key to success.

Human rights law is a subject that can lead to in-depth academic exchange and detailed development of legal issues. I am not a lawyer by education, and I am a practical person by nature. I am interested in the aspects of rights that refer to the realization of rights, to the efforts of human rights activists and the improvement of their results.

Change comes from within. A sustainable improvement in human rights can only be successful if the efforts originate from the people themselves. They - or their representatives in human rights organisations - must formulate what they think their priorities should be. My input based on knowledge and theory, should be supportive and of secondary importance.

The five year cooperation with the Indonesian police and the University of Makassar involved each year two courses lasting one week (of which one in the Netherlands) upgrading the skills and knowledge of police doctors and civilian doctors in forensic science. Though the course focused on very technical police investigation methods, my part was a two-day module on human rights. We

went through the international human rights system and used the Convention against Torture as an example (which Indonesia then was in the process of ratification). The doctors brought up very concrete cases for discussion, as they were the experts who had to investigate possible suspected victims of torture, and felt the dilemmas of loyalty towards their bosses (police officers) and towards their patients. It resulted in some heated discussions!

A more recent training I carried out with experts from Context, International Cooperation, Amnesty International and ICCO, with, as participants, some twenty human rights activists from all over the world. They had committed to participate during two full weeks with a year in-between, to learn what was necessary for practical Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation in human rights programmes. The first week (in 2006) was devoted to information sharing, and the second week (in 2007) was a workshop, or rather a writeshop where all participants drafted parts of what was to become a practical handbook entitled: "Learning from Human Rights Programmes".

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3. Evaluations

Evaluating the results of an organisation is a special job. The first time I had the opportunity to make such an assessment, I was lucky to be coached by a very experienced evaluator. She taught me: You need to formulate your arguments for assessing success or failure very clearly, and trust your own judgment in this. And then, if necessary, you have to remain open for feed-back and review your conclusions and recommendations to bridge the gap between desirability and feasibility.

My first evaluation was in 1996 in Surinam, assessing the results of the human rights organisation Moiwana '86. At the time, the assessment had to focus on output and perhaps a little bit of outcome, but there was no mention of impact for the longer term. We counted publications, press releases and radio interviews. We made a start with assessing the impact in the Surinamese, highly politicized society, but that was not appreciated. Neither by the Surinamese government, nor by the Dutch government (the donor and the sponsor of the evaluation). I often remind myself that the developments in the human rights field are not a linear process. Moiwana '86 and Surinam were a clear example of two steps forward, one step backward.

My visit to Zimbabwe took place in a period when the repression was not as fierce as it is now, 1999. We interviewed a judge who had to look over his shoulder every five minutes. We thought he exaggerated, but time proved him right. It is now three steps backward, if not more. The Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights, the organisation we evaluated, had one paid staff member and many volunteers. Our recommendations were to create a more formal organization, with annual plans and clear reporting; separate projects and people being responsible; needs assessments and measuring results. ZLHR has since grown and developed into a much bigger organisation than we had ever thought possible. It fills a need. That is clear, alas.

Then there was the assignment by the Dutch Development Agency Hivos for the evaluation of the East Timorese human rights organisation Perkumpulan/Yayasan Hak. It was in 2003, just a few years after the resignation of Indonesian President Suharto, the referendum of 1999 and the independence of Timor Leste. I carried out this evaluation together with an Indonesian colleague. I had never had such an inspiring experience: a country in the process of organizing itself, informal relations and direct access to ministers (everybody knows everybody). That should make human rights realization prosper, I thought. Too optimistic again! It takes more than a successful human rights organisation to realise a satisfactory human rights situation. Moreover, Yayasan Hak was the victim of its own successes. We recommended that it should limit its activities to real human rights enjoyment, not become active in food distribution, teaching book-keeping methods or analyzing economic perspectives, although they were pressured to do so by the Timorese civil society.