

22nd Meeting of the European Co-ordination Committee for Human Rights Documentation (ECCHRD): Berlin, 19-20 March 1999

This meeting of the ECCHRD was organised by the International Rehabilitation Centre for Torture Victims (Secretariat of the ECCHRD) and the Treatment Centre for Torture Victims (BZFO), with the assistance of HURIDOCS. It was held at the Klinikum Westend, a hospital where the BZFO is based.

This year's meeting was preceded on 18 March by a one-day training session on the use of the Internet for human rights work. During this day, Burkhard Luber provided a combination of theory and practice of information management, on-line information retrieval (search tools) and NGO networking, with examples of several useful resources. This day was attended by more than twenty participants.

On the 19th, the co-organisers welcomed the participants, and Christian Pross, Medical Director of BZFO, gave the opening address, pointing out that information technologies offer new opportunities for human rights work. James Lawson (Human Rights Information Centre, Council of Europe) was elected Chairperson of the meeting. The ca. 45 participants shortly presented themselves and their organisations.

Presentation of micro/thematic networks

Various persons present play an active role in networks dealing with particular issues related to human rights, and gave an overview of what is going on in these networks.

-Refugees

Geneviève Bador (UNHCR) informed that the refugees network (IRDN) was created in 1986. The IRDN had met during the HURIDOCS Conference in Tunis in April 1998 to discuss the future form and objectives of the network. Subsequently, the network had changed structure to continue as a task force or thematic network integrated within HURIDOCS, at present without a co-ordinator. It was considered difficult to maintain the network due to the informal affiliation of members. Also, the International Refugee Electronic Network (IRENE) previously maintained by UNHCR had been discontinued due to lack of contributions, time, and resources.

Currently, the IRDN concentrated on an update of the thesaurus related to refugees (in English, French, Spanish, and Russian), as well as on exchange of information and training.

Several meeting participants deplored the lack of co-ordination, as it was felt that the special issues dealt with by the IRDN would disappear in the general human rights issues.

-Minorities

William McKinney of the European Centre for Minority Issues (ECMI) informed about an existing network of researchers on minorities. The network co-ordinated the moderated discussion list MINERES. ECMI has a specialised library accessible via their website.

-Children

Bert Verstappen, HURIDOCS, shortly presented this network in the absence of Becky Purbrick, the Child Rights Information Network (CRIN) co-ordinator. CRIN was established in 1995 to focus on information regarding child rights. It maintains a directory of relevant Websites on the CRIN website, and has an active

mailing list. Ben Schonveld, Organisation Mondiale Contre la Torture (OMCT) referred to the NGO Coalition on the Convention on the Rights of the Child, based in Geneva.

-Women

Pinar Ilkkaracan, Women for Women's Human Rights, informed of networking activities within their focus area. One example was sending out action alerts by fax, some of which had been very successful. Initially, there had been some resistance to IT and electronic discussion lists among women's groups. But after an "End Violence" discussion list lasting for 6 months followed by a publication, attitudes had changed. The discussion list was considered very successful, well moderated and professional, with a well-defined aim. It had concentrated on strategies to prevent violations and contained a summary/digest of past development and of resources.

-Information/documentation Centres on the Council of Europe (CoE)

Viliam Figusch of the Information Centre on the CoE in Slovakia gave a short overview. There are 16 Info/Doc Centres on the CoE in its member states in Central and Eastern Europe. These small institutions each have a reference library of all CoE documents. Since 1993, some of them have set up Websites in English and their national languages, with translated summaries of court decisions, etc. All centres follow the same standards and meet twice a year to discuss future plans and priority issues from CoE and to share experiences with colleagues. One priority is human rights, with a database on the Web.

-Medical network for social reconstruction in former Yugoslavia

Anne-Marie Miörner-Wagner, OMEGA Gesundheitsstelle informed that this network grew out of annual meetings to build understanding across borders. It held a conference and an annual working meeting. The network was able to get funding for health professionals working in the area, but found it difficult to get administrative costs, e.g. equipping mobile teams, covered financially. There was a need to support local medical networks in many ways.

-Denunciation

This topic was of special interest to the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), to which Ben Schonveld gave a short introduction. OMCT is a membership network organisation created in 1986 by a number of national human rights organisations interested in finding ways to promote their work to decision-making bodies at national and regional levels. Distribution of cases is done according to relevance in order to avoid over-distribution. OMCT promotes the idea of personal contact on information management, i.e. how do the recipients want the information.

-Torture

Maria Cecilia Gomez presented FiACAT, an international Christian organisation working against torture with branches in some 50 countries. Major activities include international work and campaigns. ACAT-France focuses on issues in France related to human rights and refugees, provides training and runs a documentation centre.

Svend Bitsch Christensen (IRCT) briefed that the International Torture Documentation Network (ITDN) had held training activities since 1993, including internships at the IRCT Documentation Centre in Copenhagen. The ITDN attempts to facilitate communication among treatment centres for torture victims. The network had recently not been very active, but the members were maintaining contacts. IRCT will try to boost the

ITDN by doing a needs assessment among the network members. This will include aspects of information management, needs in setting up libraries, carrying out fact-finding missions, and setting up a client/medical monitoring system (on basis of EVSYS), etc.

Svend Bitsch Christensen also informed that IRCT was about to enter into a formal coalition, CINAT, with 5 other international anti-torture organisations (Amnesty International, OMCT, APT, Redress, and FiACAT). The coalition will co-operate on common issues, but maintain focus on individual areas of expertise.

Sven-Erik Baun (IRCT) informed about the plans to provide Internet access to the database of the IRCT Documentation Centre. While a final decision on software was pending, IRCT continues to use CDS/ISIS - the Windows version WINISIS will be tried out. The Web site would be searchable by all users, but there would be limitations in the rights to access to requested documents.

Dimitris Pantazis, Medical Rehabilitation Center for Torture Victims (MRCT), informed about the IRCT Balkan network, which for some 4-5 years has been linking countries in the Balkans. Activities include sharing information, databases, etc. among groups of peoples (centres) or individuals active in related areas.

Reports from micro networks

Following the network presentations, the participants split up into three separate groups on areas of special interest. Below are brief summary reports of these group meetings, as presented in plenary:

Conditions in detention

The group agreed that this topic could include other issues than torture, i.e. other ill-treatment aspects. One main approach would be to focus on prevention by introducing more humane treatment practices in detention.

The target of the network: to promote best practices through analysis and focusing on positive aspects. Education and training were considered important components. The introduction of family visit programmes was one example of a goal.

Torture

This group talked about training and index terms in relation to torture. With regard to the latter, it was decided that Kirsti Sparrevohn would circulate the list used by OASIS and receive comments from other organisations working on documentation about torture.

Refugees

This group agreed that the IRENE mailing list deserved to be revived, in view of the recognised importance of publishing and disseminating information publicly on the Web. The group discussed language issues and the difficulty of getting good literature on refugees. The group acknowledged that there were still problems of exchange of electronic communication with Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries - now and then, traditional means of communication may still have to be used.

It was agreed that the following thematic networks (network co-ordinator in parenthesis) will be reporting at the next ECCHRD meeting in year 2000:

- Client documentation (Sven-Erik Baun, IRCT)

- Index terms (Kirsti Sparrevohn, OASIS)
- Detention (Patrick Müller, CoE/CPT Documentation Centre)
- Refugees/minorities/migration (Geneviève Bador, UNHCR/Kerstin Lau, IOM)
- Information Technology - IT (Wiebina Heesterman, University of Warwick)
- Children (Frederiek Eggink, ICODO)
- Interface IGO/NGO (James Lawson, Human Rights Information Centre, CoE)

Developments within HURIDOCS

Bert Verstappen briefly introduced HURIDOCS to new participants, and gave an overview of recent HURIDOCS activities in the fields of tool development, training and regional networks. He highlighted the revision of the Events Standard Formats, the development of new tools for monitoring economic, social and cultural rights, training activities in Europe and the publication of a training for trainers manual.

Updating of HURIDOCS List of Index Terms

Agnethe Olesen (Danish Centre for Human Rights), informed that the HURIDOCS List was being updated. Apparently, indexing problems are been solved by using the local index field. As there is a need to expand the list, participants were encouraged to send proposals to Agneth Olesen (before 1 July 1999) who will then compile additions and send them to the HURIDOCS Secretariat.

New Software

Several participants presented software that they were either familiar with themselves or which they could recommend for various tasks.

On the issue of security and confidentiality, it was recommended to store library database and client information on different machines/servers or to install firewall software. Alternatively, CD-ROMs could be used to compile publications and documents - this would also decrease traffic on the Web server.

Electronic Communication and the Internet

Debra Guzman handed out information about several mailing lists run by HURIDOCS, HURINet and others, on human rights documentation and information handling, on new technologies, for webmasters or mailing list co-ordinators, etc.

Bert Verstappen and James Lawson jointly presented the European Human Rights Internet Site (EHRIS) project co-ordinated by the University of Belfast and a new HURIDOCS search engine that will crawl and index sites of human rights NGOs. This search engine will index every word in the Web pages included and can be offered as a search engine for sites without own search facilities.

Where Do We Go From Here?: The Future Role of Information Workers

A general discussion was held on this topic, with several participants intervening to give their points of view. In summary, the discussions pointed in two directions, both indicating a change in roles of the documentation/information worker.

First of all, many participants felt that the focus of documentation work was shifting. Previously, their task was mainly to provide documents in response to specific references and often for research purposes. Nowadays, they more often have to respond to requests related to the substance of the subjects of concern to

their organisations, and therefore requiring more in-depth knowledge and analysis. Some requests of users were very not clearly formulated, in other cases users were seeking information representing a certain attitude or viewpoint, perhaps to support a specific campaign or approach. This always implied that a more extensive dialogue between the information worker and the user was required.

Secondly, documentation workers are becoming more and more involved in pro-active information and even campaigning work, with added responsibilities in the areas of production and dissemination of advocacy material. In many cases, it was not considered sufficient anymore to just accumulate information. Documentation workers were to a larger extent required to analyse and filter information for specific target groups, to evaluate sources, and to acquire knowledge of how to present information in the most suitable manner.

Whereas some meeting participants saw a distinction between the roles of documentation and information workers, others felt that the work and skills required were closely interrelated and could not be segregated, as was the case in the past.

Human rights work in general is changing fast, not least due to Information Technology and other technological developments, and NGOs have to redefine the roles and tasks of their staff continuously so that their work can have a maximum impact. Acknowledging that organisations were competing with commercial public relations activities for public attention, it could in some cases be beneficial to rethink the purpose and target groups of an organisation and implement more aggressive advocacy approaches. Such an approach may also be more attractive to potential donors, who in general seem to be more interested in supporting comprehensive information strategies rather than even well functioning libraries.

Discussions on good practices concerning handling of e-mail information, discussion and mailing lists ensued under many of the presentations. In summary, it was advised:

- (a) to give e-mails good headers identifying contents,
- (b) not just to send out in bulk, but to try to evaluate recipients' needs,
- (c) to attempt to develop standards for publishing good information, and
- (d) to discourage list administrators to add you to lists, you have not expressed interest in.

Next meeting

The participants accepted with acclamation the offer from Montse Tafalla Plana of the Institut de Drets Humans de Catalunya, to host and organise the 23rd ECCHR meeting in Barcelona in April 2000. The International Rehabilitation Centre for Torture Victims agreed to continue as the Secretariat of the ECCHR. The meeting was concluded with a special vote of thanks and acclamation to the very competent organisers, Leyla Schön and her colleagues Arne Oehlsen and Britta Jenkins of BZFO.