

The role of non-state actors in Human Rights education: reflections from the perspective of a research and experience in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Janaina Pereira Antunes (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil)

Independent lawyer and volunteer teacher on the social program “YCI” (“Youth Career Initiative”)

M.A. in Law and Sociology (UFF/Brazil) and Especialization in Human Rights at Human Rights Centre (Law School of Coimbra University/Portugal)

Email address: janaantunes@gmail.com

1. A research with a group of young people who were raised and lived in urban peripheries in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil)

In Brazil, there are two common and widespread public perceptions of young people who live in urban peripheries in the country. On the one hand, an idea that they are all potential criminals; on the other hand, a belief that slum (“*favelas*”) residents are apathetic (and unhappy) victims of an unfair social and economic order. Since I was interested in a specific group of young people who did not fit into either description, I prepared a qualitative research on 19-23 year-olds slum residents in the State of Rio de Janeiro during my Master’s Degree Program. I tried to discuss their choices and paths, considering their own reports about their own lives.

The research was made possible due to my contact with those young people, through a social program I volunteer, called “Youth Career Initiative” (“YCI”). The first goal of “YCI” program is to improve the *curriculum* of poor young people: “*YCI is used as a tool to tackle or prevent issues such as youth unemployment, social exclusion, poverty, and exploitation*”¹.

¹ At <http://www.youthcareerinitiative.org/> (on October 31, 2015).

YCI was first established in Bangkok, Thailand, in 1995, as a Career Development Program for youth. Currently, YCI is a global programme coordinated by two international organizations (International Tourism Partnership and Business In The Community)² and implemented by private hotels. In 2015, it took place in Australia, Brazil, Costa Rica, Egypt, Ethiopia, Hungary, India, Jordan, Mexico, Poland, Romania, Senegal, Thailand and Vietnam³. Local organizations and partner hotels may vary, and local needs may be adjusted, across countries.

In Brazil, the program lasts about six months, and the group is composed of ten young people. During these six months, participants are entitled to public transportation, food, uniform and insurance against personal accidents.

Young people enrolled on the program spend some time in different areas of hotel, in order to get practice and experience. They also have theoretical classes.

I've rendered services to one of the partner hotels since 2005. In 2006, I suggested to the responsible at the hotel that I would like to take part in the program teaching "Citizenship, Human Rights and Ethics". I have been teaching since then (except in 2013).

In each and every group, I faced different challenges, ranging from issues related to personal skills, such as politeness, behaviour, formal education, and abilities to write well and express ideas clearly. I also found different levels of interest in the topics I discuss in class and witnessed different attitudes in some of my students: some of them were getting interested in classes and made efforts to take advantages of the program; some of them seemed not to have any interest at all.

As a result of my personal experience, I decided to get deeper in their life stories, trying to understand their lives and choices. This marked the beginning of my research, in 2012: up until then, I have taught 07 (seven) different classes each year.

My first step was to think about the way we understand youth and young people. As a first idea, "youth" is a social and historical creation: the meaning of it was constructed through culture and social relations. In Western modern society, for instance, in particular in the 20th century, childhood would be identified as the first

² Also at <http://www.youthcareerinitiative.org/> (on October 31, 2015).

³ Also at <http://www.youthcareerinitiative.org/> (on October 31, 2015).

socialization process while youth would be the second one. It's worth mentioning that this idea of youth was first identified with the bourgeoisie⁴.

Dayrell and the Brazilian scholars Letícia Veloso and Livia Barbosa⁵ share a different concept of youth: a time of life inside a broader process related to identity and personality formation. Young people must be seen as individuals who act in the world, which means that they are not just waiting passively to become adults: Youth has a meaning itself.

The Portuguese author José Machado Pais⁶ teaches that many of the life contingencies may influence (and, in fact, do influence) the choices of young people, in many different ways. He also remarks that each personal experience is unique.

Concerning poor young people who were borned and raised in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), the Brazilian Pedro Paulo de Oliveira⁷ points out that social poorness cannot be directly associated or understood as mandatory to criminality; however, it is an important factor to understand youth that get involved with drug dealing in poor areas called "slums" or "comunidades" ("favelas" or "comunidades", in Portuguese). In Rio de Janeiro, there is a serious problem related to drug trafficking. In "slums" or "comunidades", a lot of children see weapons and watch violence, while they are growing there, due to drug dealing. Oliveira remarks that it is a strong influence for children and teenagers to raise watching violence and people with weapons.⁸

According to Oliveira, children and teenagers who grow up surrounded by violence and weapons may ended up getting involved in drug dealing:

"Taking part on interactions in criminal networks may turn out to become a slow process in which an illegal act practiced today can be repeated next week or in another moment, until it generates benefits, from one side, but also duties, from another side. Being tied to symbolic and practical interactions in which criminal networks have spacial and material close

⁴ In accordance with the Brazilian Helena Wendel Abramo, in the text (in Portuguese) "Condição juvenil no Brasil contemporâneo", on the book "Retratos da Juventude Brasileira (Análises de uma pesquisa nacional)" (São Paulo: Fundação Perseu Abramo, 2005).

⁵ This is found in the "Introduction" of the book (in Portuguese) "Juventudes e gerações no Brasil contemporâneo" (Porto Alegre: Sulina, 2012).

⁶ "Ganchos, tachos e biscates. Jovens, trabalho e futuro" (Porto: Âmbar, 2001).

⁷ "Sobre a adesão juvenil às redes de criminalidade em favelas", published on the book "Vida sob cerco: violência e rotina nas favelas do Rio de Janeiro" (Rio de Janeiro: Nova Fronteira, 2008).

⁸ From the same text already mentioned. It is important to note that drugs sale does not happen exclusively in "slums" or other poor areas. However, the way it happens in those areas presents the mentioned particularities.

proximity shall be taken as a significant variable to clarify youth joining subcultures of crime.”⁹

With these premises, we now focus on the group I had interviewed for the research. The group was comprised of 19-23 year-olds poor young people who lived in slums and other poor areas in the State of Rio de Janeiro.

All interviewees identified working and studying as an effective tool to improve their material life conditions. They all believe their lives may be changed and improved by their own effort: They have tried to make the most of every opportunity they happen to seize, including not only formal education, but also theater or dance courses, sport or a social project.

I was able to identify a few factors that did contribute to their choices and paths. Firstly, all of them had a close relative that was concerned about their formation, in a broad sense: their behaviour, moral attitudes and formal education. Values and lessons learned in Family contribute with their formation. Although *family* is a very important factor, it is not an exclusive aspect. Going to school and studying also contribute to their choices and paths. Joining inclusive activities, whether a theater group, dance group or social program, was also important.

Also, enrolling on the YCI program empowered them, from a Human Rights perspective. Firstly, by giving them professional skills demanded by labour market. Before the experience on the social program, they failed to reach an effective inclusion in labor market due to several factors, especially lack of work experience, professional training and network. When the program is concluded, we must consider they have professional training and new learning, the expansion of social networks, the chance to have experience at places where they did not use to have access, and still the chance to interact with new and different people. All of it made an important impact on each one of them.

Secondly, there was a personal development, in regards to interest and behaviour while working or having discussions in classes.

Thirdly, there was a positive impact on their self-confidence to build a better future, especially the possibility have a decent life.

⁹Free translation from the Portuguese version. The reference is the same text already mentioned.

According to our research, contingencies difficulties (such as material, emotional or psychological aspects, among others) cannot be seen as mandatory conditions for a particular "role model". Although our interviewees lived in violent neighborhoods, they have never considered crime as an option. Although, they pointed out that disadvantaged material conditions reduced their chances to attend good schools, extra courses or to travel, they did not picture themselves as social and economic victims. They believe they were able to choose their own way and to make options, despite their difficult material context.

In Brazil, we face serious problems especially related to (i) social and economic inequality, even social exclusion for a part of society; (ii) low quality or even lack of basic public services, such as good schools and health care; and (iii) corruption in a large scale. Despite this dramatic context, from our research, we are confident that we cannot reduce the chances of low-income youth to the position of criminals or victims. Their lives are not exclusively conditioned by material and financial aspects. It is important to remark that although **we do not ignore** the relevance of these aspects,, they are not the sole ones. There is a variety of factors and possibilities that impact the lives of poor young people.

Considering what was presented in this first part, I would like to emphasize that, based on my personal experience and the research with former YCI participants, projects managed to make human rights a fact can truly impact in the lives of people who need it. Impacts can be verified on both personal and professional dimensions.

2. Human rights: thinking rights and duties

I would like to make a few comments on the potential impact of Human Rights basic learning, from my perspective as a Human Rights teacher on this social program, after 9-year experience.

Human Rights must take into account the crucial connection between different disciplines, such as Law, History, Philosophy and Sociology. Thus, every year, I tried to work with students from this wide perspective, and also connect with the idea of Citizenship. I used to work considering the local scenario (Brazil and especially Rio de Janeiro), but also from worldwide perspectives. My first goal was to introduce basic ideas, and to make them develop critical and reflective reasoning. Secondly, to make

them understand that many rights we have today were a result of fierce struggle. Thirdly, to make them understand that we still face many problems related to human rights that demand actions. Actions that should be taken not only from the Government, but also from citizens.

I believe this new learning (concerning Human Rights) can empower them and their families to rights and possibilities in their own lives.

Also, the themes discussed in classes could lead them to think about the way they see their roles in society. In this sense, the decisive point was this one: with the classes, I tried to work with them the idea that human rights need to be understood and experienced together with duties.

When I started teaching on the program, I was mainly concerned with rights. My goal was empowering their lives. However, my own experience with different students profiles helped me to realize that I should stress duties as much as rights in classes (and lives).

As an inspiration, I would like to bring the speech of the Portuguese writer José Saramago at the Nobel Banquet, on December 10, 1998. By that time, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights completed 50 years. There were ceremonial commemorations, and Saramago had nothing against it. However, in this speech, he said:

“In this half-century, obviously governments have not morally done for human rights all that they should. The injustices multiply, the inequalities get worse, the ignorance grows, the misery expands. This same schizophrenic humanity that has the capacity to send instruments to a planet to study the composition of its rocks can with indifference note the deaths of millions of people from starvation. To go to Mars seems more easy than going to the neighbour. Nobody performs her or his duties. Governments do not, because they do not know, they are not able or they do not wish, or because they are not permitted by those who effectively govern the world: The multinational and pluricontinental companies whose power - absolutely non-democratic - reduce to next to nothing what is left of the ideal of democracy. We citizens are not fulfilling our duties either. Let us think that no human rights will exist without symmetry of the duties that correspond to them. It is not to be expected that governments in the next 50 years will do it. Let us common citizens therefore

Speak up. With the same vehemence as when we demanded our rights, let us demand responsibility over our duties. Perhaps the world could turn a little better."¹⁰

Human rights will become a stronger institution if we understand – and determinate in our lives – that they comprise not only rights, but also duties. If one person expects his/her basic Human Rights to be respected, he/she must follow the golden rule: “*Do unto others as you would like them do unto you*”. No matter how old this rule is, still difficult to be effective.

I believe that we can begin to reflect and work on daily and simple activities. Jokes, for example, can be prejudiced towards minorities. In regards to it, awareness of the disrespectful act could be a first step, in regards to Human Rights.

My classes in the social program tried to contribute to this process. Along all these years in class, I have witnessed how some of my students were touched by the topics we discussed in class and how some developed a sense of responsibility.

In 2015, discussing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and explaining the whole context of World War II, I mentioned the Eichmann trial and Hanna Arendt’s analysis, in particular the idea that ordinary people may also do evil things. The students got interested in the idea that we are responsible for our actions all the time. We then had many discussions on how to apply these ideas on daily activities.

One day, in class, three students wanted to share a private experience. They were on a train, going to a very distant local from Rio de Janeiro downtown. Having finished to eat a snack, they started to look for a garbage bin. Since the train was completely full, it was not an easy task. However, they did it. They told me that everyone in the train could not stop staring at them: it was hard to understand why they would try to reach a garbage bin when they could just throw the trash on the floor. Usually, people just throw it on train floor, according to them. Notwithstanding, they had internalized the importance to practice small acts, during the most simple routine. How can we ask for environmental rights, if we don’t understand we are part of this environment? Those 3 students did understand this lesson and try to experience it.

In 2014, by the end of the program, one student told me: “You’re with me most of the time. Since our first classes, I keep thinking about things you’ve been teaching

¹⁰ At http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1998/saramago-speech_en.html

us, and how we are supposed to act in society”. He used to sit on the subway floor, whenever he could not find an available seat. He told me he stopped behaving like this because he finally understood that other people also have the right to circulate freely. It may seem to be a very simple act – as a matter of fact, it is. However, unless we are able to act in the very simple acts on a daily basis, we may not achieve greater human rights dimensions.

While I was writing this text, I met this ex-student by chance. He has just married and introduced me to his wife saying: “She was my teacher of rights and duties”. It was remarkable, for me, that he mentioned rights with duties.

Also in 2014, by the end of the course, another student told me: “If we have classes like that since we were little kids, in school, our country society would be different”. Although this girl lived in poor conditions – even living with big rats outside her house (and inside, sometimes), she has never complained about her living conditions, while she was my student. Considering her words mentioned above, we can understand that everyone can do something in the field of Human Rights and citizenship.

These three stories try to illustrate that when students get touched by the topics discussed in classroom, they can reflect and change or improve the way they see themselves and the world. Furthermore, it can change his or her actions. Learning and thinking about Human Rights can make a difference.

It is also important to mention that feeling respected can contribute to a turning point in regards to others.

They also enjoyed to share what they learned with friends and family. I had students who told me that they talked about the subjects discussed in classes with family, at home. Again, I would like to relate one of these stories.

In 2009, one student told me that she used to discuss with her stepmother everything she learned in class. Her stepmother worked as a maid, in a family house, and had only a few years of primary education. The days that we had classes, when she arrived at home, while her stepmother was cooking, they talked about what she learned. This student liked especially to share the lessons and example of Martin Luther King Jr.. At the ceremony of program’s conclusion, her stepmother approached and told me she also learned with the classes.

It is interesting to emphasize that, during the research, the majority of the interviewed told me they wanted to “contribute with the world”, “to do something good in society, act for others who need”.

This is to illustrate the power of the subject in daily lives, and also in regards to duties to others.

It is important to note that what we have, with the classes, is a possibility of touching them, with Human Rights basic knowledge. Along all those years, the journey with them was not easy. Also, students react differently: there is always a group who is interested, and there is always another who seems not to get involved or interested. Notwithstanding, there is always the possibility to touch one, a few or all of students: I had around 80 (eighty) students in this project, and I can say that I had a positive feedback from a part of them.

I would like to finish this second part by emphasizing that, from my 9-year experience working with basic concepts of rights and duties and encouraging daily actions, we can truly build a new and different society, based on the respect to each other, and the dignity of every person.

3. Conclusion

Based on the previous topics, I would like to emphasize to the idea that non-state actors can participate in a significant way to make human rights effective.

I would like to bring attention to Norberto Bobbio’s words:

“For who intends to make an analysis without prejudice related to human rights development after World War II, I would advise this wholesome exercise: to read the Universal Declaration and after that to look around. Will be obliged to recognize that, despite the advances of enlightened philosophers, bold formulations of lawyers, the efforts of politicians with good will, the way to go is still long. And will have the impression that human history, although millenia old, when compared to the big tasks which are in front all of us, maybe has just started.”¹¹

¹¹ Free translation from this part on page 44, from the book “The Age of Rights”, the following version in Portuguese: “*A Era dos Direitos*” (Rio de Janeiro: Elsevier, 2004, 13a reimpressão).

In Western societies, governments have duties and accountability in regards to human rights. In general terms, considering public politics, we are still far away from reasonable standards. Notwithstanding, Governments are not exclusive responsible for this accomplishment. Public and private companies have also duties to society, in regards to human rights; Citizens as well.

The essence of human rights is about respect and dignity. Human Rights is also about people and daily situations. A joke, for example, can be prejudiced towards women, immigrants or religion.

To affirm human rights in daily lives, the participation of non-state actors opens the possibility to impact in society basis, from a cultural perspective. We can understand this kind of contribution thinking about initiatives and actions in the largest possible sense, like roundtable discussions in schools and universities, with children, teenagers, young people and the families; awareness campaigns by internet; social programs to share knowledge and open possibilities for who need the most.

Thus, my proposal is not to impose a doctrine but, instead, to work with the ideas of respect and dignity.

Slowly, we will have chances to get a stronger cultural basis concerning human rights. Surely, it can be seen as utopia. I would dare to affirm there is no other possible way to live according to this philosophy, unless we, global citizens, do it. As also written by Norberto Bobbio, “*considering the great wishes of people with good will, we are too late*”¹².

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¹² Free translation from this part on page 61, from the book “*The Age of Rights*”, the following version in Portuguese: “*A Era dos Direitos*” (Rio de Janeiro: Elsevier, 2004, 13a reimpressão).

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