

Human Rights? Are they serious?

from Helen Bayes

The Australian Government might claim it recognises the essential roles of non-government organisations which work for human rights, but it has no on-going programs to support their work. Nor are there any funding programs for children's rights projects, unless they are formulated as child protection, education, health and so forth.

The Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department has no funds set aside to provide grants to human rights NGOs working in Australia on domestic human rights issues, or to support public education projects. Theoretically HREOC has a role in this, but it has so little funding that its immediate responsibilities absorb everything it has.

This means that specific human rights projects such as information campaigns, investigations of violations, support and ad-

vocacy about complaints have to seek funding through donations, benevolent trusts or corporate sponsorship. All these are require intensive work, super-human patience and extremely thick skin.

There is a widespread scepticism about the importance of human rights work in Australia. There is also a deep-seated view that only direct services to the needy are really worth supporting. Work on government policy, legal reform, community prejudices and misinformation is simply viewed as not worth the scarce dollar.

No funds have been allocated in Australia to the UN Decade for Human Rights Education, which calls for the development of human rights curricula and national information campaigns.

Human rights organisations do not even meet eligibility requirements for tax deductibility of donations, because they do not provide concrete services as required by the Tax Act, to relieve distress, poverty etc. Amnesty International was granted tax deductibility by Parliament after a long and hard-fought campaign. DCI has been told by the Tax Office twice that it is not even eligible for sales tax exemption, even though many of the organisations with which we collaborate are exempt.

No money - no projects - no national information campaigns - plenty of misinformation campaigns (privately funded) - community opposition to Children's rights and human rights - political caution - nothing in it for corporations - no government will - no money - no projects....

NO MONEY - LET'S CONSULT INSTEAD!

In the absence of funding programs, which inherently lead to consultative relations between government and NGOs, the Departments responsible for human rights (DFAT and A-G'S) have turned to Consultative Forums with human rights NGOs. These enable a frank and informal exchange of views between national human rights NGOs and government officials, on Australia's human rights performance, internationally and domestically.

The Department of Foreign Affairs And Trade has provided regular Consultative Meetings with NGOs for several years. The Minister usually attends one per year, and a wide range of officials from many departments also attend in the background. NGOs are able to question government policy, present alternative views and information, and hear direct reports of UN activities. The National NGO Consultation on Commercial Child Sexual Exploitation held in June (see p. 1) was supported by DFAT, as a way of quickly gathering information and views for the Australian Delegation's input to the Stockholm Congress.

Now the Attorney-General's Department is setting up an NGO Forum on Domestic Human Rights, and has invited DCI and about 30 other NGOs to a meeting to plan the future of the forum. This forum will enable the exchange of information and discussion of domestic human rights issues and developments. Theme days on such issues as discrimination (sex, race, disability etc) children and indigenous issues will be built into the Forum's agenda. DCI will ensure that children's issues are covered in each of these broad themes! No funding for travel is provided, but the NGOs go anyway. The Forums are informative and feel like a real opportunity to influence government thinking. It is valuable to meet other NGOs too, and hear each other's priorities and concerns. It is not an activity which is likely to attract donations, and it's hard to explain to members, but in the long-run it will help lift human rights and children's rights higher in the Government's priorities. That MIGHT also lead to a more support, government and private, for NGOs doing this work in Australia.