

We must promote Human Rights (March 13, 2008; Folha de S. Paulo)

By Raymundo Magliano Filho

A mere reading of the newspapers is evidence enough as to how Brazil lacks transparency and social equality - fundamental conditions for the exercise of democracy. Reintroducing this issue is imperative, especially in this 2008, when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights celebrates its 60th anniversary. Unfortunately, in Brazil and in many other countries, many sectors of the society still view the theme in an erroneous and biased way.

The anniversary of the Declaration, next December, is an excellent opportunity to clarify the issue and enlighten the population by way of a broad debate. In this task, the role of the press has been vital. Due to the media's coverage over the past years of violations against the life and dignity of many Brazilians, many hitherto theoretical rights have become known to the people, who have thus been able to make use of them consistently.

Kant believed that knowledge is the first condition for mankind to overcome minority. With that, he meant that people, through information and knowledge, are able to reach full citizenship. This formulation coincides with the upholding of human rights by showing that its exercise is only possible in a society whose democratic values include transparency, disclosure and the access of individuals to public goods.

It is only in such conditions that the Declaration -originally, an international peace project- becomes a true guarantee of the protection of rights.

It is precisely the abyss between the rights proclaimed in that document and the social inequality in many regions of the world that prompted the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Louise Arbour, to propose a wide-ranging agenda to divulge and defend human rights this year, culminating in the anniversary of the Declaration, in December.

Arbour announced the idea when she was visiting Brazil for the first time, three months ago. Other UN-linked bodies, such as the Global Compact, which rally the corporate world in defense of social and economic inclusion, are already engaged in the proposal.

Indeed, two of the Compact's principles were extracted from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Business can give a strong contribution to Arbour's campaign. The adoption of corporate social responsibility policies is clear evidence that business is fully prepared to promote human rights, which, together with essential rights, are also enshrined in the Universal Declaration.

Besides, businesses are fundamental agents for the economic inclusion of vast portions of the population, either as a result of their own activity -as wealth generators-, or of the financial education programs offered by many companies in Brazil, singly or in partnership with universities. Arbour had the opportunity to learn about several initiatives by Brazilian companies in the field of human rights. She was at the Bovespa

headquarters to address the theme and candidly admitted her own "prejudice". Before an audience of over 120 people, the high commissioner stated that she could never have imagined that, on her visit to Brazil, she would talk about human rights at the headquarters of a stock exchange. Arbour paid close attention to many proposals made by the companies attending the event, such as the creation of a movement, together with financial institutions, NGOs and universities, to promote a series of educational initiatives on human rights this year.

Here is a project that embraces Norberto Bobbio's philosophy, to whom the common good is larger than the sum of all individual goods. This common and universal good is precisely what characterizes the strength of the 1948 Declaration. With it, wrote Bobbio, the UN managed to "replace a peace based on a pure and simple balance of individual forces by another one founded on the superiority and authority of a collective force, which constitutes the expression of a common power". Yet this breakthrough will be devoid of meaning if it fails to engage the whole population.

Social inclusion is indispensable to any movement that aims at adapting our values in favor of a fairer reality in this country.

If the culture on the importance of human rights is not disseminated, the evolution we need will not be accomplished. As Hannah Arendt said, power arises out of joint action, and therein lies the only route to citizenship and dignity for all men and women.

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