

## Environmental Health, Human Rights and Global Governance

*By Fred O'Brien,  
Honorary Vice President IFEH*

### Statement discovered on a headteacher's notice board

*Dear Teacher,  
I am a survivor of a concentration camp. My eyes saw what no man should witness:  
Gas chambers built by learned engineers.  
Children poisoned by educated physicians.  
Women and babies shot and burned by high school and college graduates.  
So I am suspicious of education.  
My request is:  
Help your students become human. Your efforts must never produce learned monsters, skilled psychopaths, educated Eichmanns.  
Reading, writing, arithmetic are important only if they serve to make our children more human.*

From: **Yes You Do Count: A Teaching Programme on Human Rights** (1995) by Maura Ward, Irish Commission for Justice and Peace, ISBN 0 905911 20 2

**The Charter of the United Nations** was signed on June 26, 1945 in San Francisco and came into force on October 24, 1945. It was an attempt to draw up international legal standards for the protection of the fundamental human rights of men and women. Its declared objective is the development of society, improved living conditions, and greater freedom and security for the individual. All UN Human Rights instruments stem from this Charter.

**The Universal Declaration of Human Rights** was passed by the United Nations General Assembly on December 10, 1948 and affirms that the genuine recognition and observance of all the rights and freedoms contained in the declaration is a goal to be sought by all peoples and all nations. The Declaration is an important recognition of the personal dignity of every human being and outlines the right of every person to circumstances, including environmental conditions that lead to a fully human life.

The constituent organizations of the UN consist of members nominated by the public authority of the various nations and are entrusted with highly important international functions in the economic, social, cultural, educational, health and environmental health fields. The UN Organization encourages and assists friendly relations between nations based on principles of equality, mutual respect, and extensive cooperation in every field of human endeavour.

The Report of The Commission on Global Governance, **Our Global Neighbourhood (1995)**, highlights the necessity for a reassessment of the relationship between the UN and its family of organizations and the growing world-wide array of organized non-state activity in **redressing wrongs that imperil people's security**. The report, additionally, acknowledges that NGO's have provided vital assistance to the UN and "more and



*"Climate Change: The Scientific Evidence", moderated by Andrew Revkin of the New York Times, at UN Headquarters in New York. United Nations, New York, September 5, 2007.*

more ... are helping to set public policy agendas – identifying and defining critical issues, and providing policy makers with advice and assistance.” Additionally, it notes the significance for governance of “this movement beyond advocacy and the provision of services towards broader participation in the public policy realm”. (cf. pps. 253-255)

### **Practical Training and Action Required**

A purely theoretical outline of the principles underpinning international laws and conventions on human rights and a listing of the social and economic obligations implied for environmental health would be totally inadequate in bringing about improvements. Practical training is needed and a deep sensitivity to cultural values required when environmental health needs are being addressed.

The **Environmental Health in Disasters and Emergencies (EHIDE)** initiative supported by the Federation in June of 2006 and provided with necessary funds as a result of the August 2007 Federation Council meeting in Nairobi, Kenya, Africa, is a flagship on how regions might move forward in this area of major global environmental health need. With the commitment of the Federation to principles of solidarity, subsidiarity and enculturation regional IFEH blocks can provide input to realizing the aims of their regional multinational human rights Charters. The African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights (1986) (The “Banjul Charter”), for example, is based on the UN 1948 Declaration but with emphasis on specifically African values.

### **Role of the Federation**

The International Federation of Environmental Health, as **the** body, representing in its membership the core competencies of environmental health professionals from around the world, has a responsibility and a right to pursue avenues to promote, through the rule of law, the establishment of mechanisms that more effectively deal with disasters and emergencies. In addition to supporting the EHIDE initiative and like projects, there is a responsibility on IFEH to influence nations, multinational regional blocks (e.g. African and European Unions) and the UN so as to establish mechanisms that provide for the basic environmental health needs of human populations affected by natural disasters, war, or as a consequence of human dislocation events. Such ways and means should include the availability of such services with the consent, if possible, of the Government(s) involved.

## **LAUNCHING THE AFRICA ACADEMY FOR ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH – NAIROBI KENYA, ON 29 AUGUST 2007 – A MILESTONE FOR AFRICA**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

An historic event for environmental health training in Africa took place when the Academy was officially launched at the 1st All Africa Congress on Environmental Health held in Nairobi Kenya that took place from 27-30 August 2007. The launch took place after more than 10 years of preparatory work that included a consultation process amongst Africa members of the International Federation for Environmental Health (IFEH) that led to the approval of the constitution of the academy as well as approval by the IFEH.

### **AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE ACADEMY**

The Academy is a body of academic institutions, organisations representing environmental health professionals and expert practitioners for the advancement of the science and practice of environmental health in Africa, to represent academic institutions and the Africa Group of IFEH and to promote the interest and uphold the status of environmental health training in Africa. The main objectives of the Academy are:

- To advance the discipline of environmental health training in Africa.
- To represent key stakeholders in environmental health training in Africa.
- To strive to improve the standard of environmental health training in Africa
- To promote the national continental and international recognition of environmental health.
- To be a point of reference to professional advice on environmental health training.
- To facilitate contact with other international environmental health training institutions and bodies/associations that share values compatible with the aims of the Academy.
- To promote exchange of environmental health academics and professionals within Africa and abroad.
- To promote sharing of best practices in environmental health within Africa and abroad.