“FORMATS ARE A TOOL FOR THE QUEST FOR TRUTH”: HURIDOCS Human Rights Materials for Library and Human Rights Workers

by Susan L. Maret

Sergio Vieira De Mello’s (2003) idea that “the culture of human rights derives its greatest strength from the informed expectations of each individual,” underscores the relationship between information and human rights. Further, international human rights instruments such as the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1976), and the Johannesburg Principles on National Security, Freedom of Expression and Access to Information (1996), serve as benchmarks of what constitute a set of information rights, which includes the implied role of information in self-determination. It is in this context that Martin Ennals (74) writes,

Without the knowledge that human rights exist, people cannot seek their own protection. Without the knowledge that human rights are violated, no individuals or organization can seek to provide protection. Both the promotion and protection of human rights therefore require that information be available for all.

Enter Human Rights Information and Documentation Systems, International

In 1981, Martin Ennals (74), former Secretary-General of Amnesty International, and founding president of Human Rights Information and Documentation Systems, International (HURIDOCS), observed that despite a “standardized, universal and statutory concern for human rights, there is yet no universal and homogenous system of handling information about human rights.” This dearth of information standards, techniques and appropriate technology for human rights violations information classification, documentation, reporting and storage led Ennals and others in the global human rights community to propose a “Human Rights International Documentation System,” which led to the formal establishment of HURIDOCS in 1982. HURIDOCS offices are located in Geneva, Switzerland.
Acting on Ennals’ idea, over the last several decades HURIDOCS has evolved into a global network of human rights advocates concerned with various educational and technological aspects of human rights information. Fundamental to its mission, HURIDOCS activities include “access to human rights information by developing and promoting monitoring, information handling and communication tools for use by the human rights community.” HURIDOCS also works closely with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in networking, information exchange, and adapting its publications for specific cases of human rights infringements. For example, the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW) and the International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims (IRCT) modified HURIDOCS materials for their work.

HURIDOCS offers training to representative human rights groups and advocates in the practical use of human rights violations classification, documentation and monitoring tools. Specifically, HURIDOCS concentrates on methods and techniques for human rights information handling, rather than on human rights in general. HURIDOCS has identified twenty-six training modules that focus on the relationship of human rights and information, information and communications technology, documentation, and HURIDOCS tools and monitoring and reporting techniques. Training on these educational tools, is, in a real sense, community capacity building.

**Documentation for Action: Various HURIDOCS Materials**

As former HURIDOCS chairperson Kumar Rupesinghe (vi) writes, information can be one of the most potent weapons in the battle against abuses of human rights. Furthermore, Rupesinghe believes, the documentation of human rights abuse

...begins with a word, then a phrase, the accumulation of facts and ideas, the creation of a history, and then an enduring memory, which all serve in resisting and turning back humanity.

Materials produced by HURIDOCS are a distinct set of materials geared towards library practitioners and those human rights workers who require classification, documentation and monitoring tools to manage aspects of human rights-related information collection, organization and manipulation. To this end, HURIDOCS goal is to “ensure that human rights organisations have the tools, knowledge, skills and supporting services to effectively utilise their information resources.”
Many of HURIDOCS library-related tools are MARC and AACR2 compatible, available in multiple languages (English, French, Spanish, Russian, and Arabic), and free through http://huridocs.org/tools.htm. HURIDOCS, in fact, encourages the use and distribution of its suite of human rights publications. Plug-ins such as Adobe Acrobat and (un)zip software are required to open and save some HURIDOCS materials. If ordering hardcopies of HURIDOCS publications, an easily accessible order form is available through the HURIDOCS website. Hardcopies of materials are sold at a modest price, and may be ordered by credit card through Paypal, bank transfer or money order.

For the purposes of this article, HURIDOCS materials are sorted into the following categories: library-type documentation tools, investigation (event)-related and monitoring tools, and web-based tools.

**Library-type Documentation Tools**

HURIDOCS library documentation tools such as the Bibliographic Standard Formats (http://www.huridocs.org/bibsf) the INDEP/SERIAL databases (http://www.huridocs.org/indepser), and “how to” guides such as “How to Index” (http://www.huridocs.org/popindex.htm), are noteworthy in that they not only assist those library workers with no formal library training, but aid experienced library workers in managing information in specialized human rights collections.

Specific HURIDOCS efforts are as follows:

“How to Index” (Vol. 4, HURIDOCS Human Rights Monitoring and Documentation Series) This manual describes the different phases involved in the process of creating an index and thesauri, and using these tools to systematically index documents.

“HURIDOCS Standard Formats for the Recording and Exchange of Bibliographic Information Concerning Human Rights” by Aida Maria Noval, and a HURIDOCS Task Force, available in English, French and Arabic. This publication contains forms and guidelines for recording information regarding documents on human rights.

INDEP/SERIAL databases are for handling human rights bibliographic information. PC only.

“Standards for Electronic Publications: XML and Dublin Core” and the draft “Proposal for HURIDOCS to recommend use of metadata for electronic publications on the web” recommend that human
rights organizations which produce electronic publications adopt the Dublin Core metadata standard.

Investigation and Monitoring Tools

Investigation (event)-related tools are defined by HURIDOCS as those materials used “in conjunction with fact-finding, including gathering and recording information [of] events that actually or possibly contain human rights violations.” Events Standard Formats are produced by HURIDOCS for recording cases, documenting human rights-related (violation) events, and designing human rights-related databases. Reflecting Martin Ennals’ thought that “Without the knowledge that human rights are violated, no individuals or organization can seek to provide protection,” HURIDOCS notes that

…formats are a tool for the quest of truth. With them, it is possible to compile comprehensive data that tell in the minutest detail what became of a single victim. It is equally possible to compile comprehensive data that tell what happened to a whole country.

There are two main methodologies that can be employed in monitoring human rights violations: the “events” methodology, and the “indicators-based” methodology (Guzman 249: 2001).

The events methodology is used intensively in monitoring violations of civil and political rights, and involves the identification of the various acts that have a beginning and an end, or in more technical terms, acts of “commission” and “omission” that constitute, or lead to human rights violations. The events methodology has been effective in monitoring acts such as killings, arrests, torture and the like. Specifically, an event is

…something that happens, with a beginning and an end, and which progresses until its logical conclusion. It can be a single act, a series of related acts, or a combination of related acts happening together. For an event to be included in human rights monitoring, at least one act that it contains should be qualified as a human rights violation (e.g. arbitrary arrest, which is a violation of the right to liberty), or similar to such an act (e.g. legal arrest).

To further delineate the events methodology, HURIDOCS provides definitions for various elements of the methodology. For example, definitions include:

act — a single piece of movement or action, usually involving force. Usually, an act is committed by a person (an individual
or a group) against another, in which case it is referred to as an act of commission. Act can also mean the non-performance of an expected or required movement or action, in which case it is referred to as an act of omission.

victim — the person (individual or group) who is the object of an act

perpetrator — the person (individual or group) who commits an act that constitutes a violation. Perpetrators can be a state or non-state entities

means — the means used could be concrete arms such as guns or more abstract processes such as lawmakering

Such definitions serve to frame a violation(s) in precise terms in order to establish involvement, relationships, roles and responsibility.

The indicators-based methodology is related to human rights norms and standards, and is especially suited for monitoring violations of specific economic, social and cultural rights such as the enjoyment of the right to education by a given population (Guzman 249).

HURIDOCS also produces materials which assist in the ongoing monitoring of human rights violations. The elements of monitoring are:

• collecting or receiving data or information over an extended period of time
• application of norms and standards which that act as a benchmark of what constitutes a human rights infringement
• results in a formal report that is used to take further action and make recommendations

HURIDOCS investigation and monitoring tools include:

“HURIDOCS Events Standard Formats”
“Human Rights Monitoring and Documentation Series,” a series of “how to” manuals on the basics of recording, investigating and monitoring suspected human rights violations,
“What is Monitoring?” (vol. 1) an overview of the subject of human rights monitoring; the work also discusses the various types of monitoring carried out by inter-governmental agencies, governmental bodies and non-governmental organizations; available in English, Spanish and Russian.
“What is Documentation?” (vol. 2) is intended for documentalists and
information workers of human rights organizations. It deals with the following issues: what is documentation, what is a document, why document, seeking information, producing documents, acquiring documents, organizing documents and providing user services. This volume can be printed in HTML and PDF formats; available in English, French, Spanish and Russian.

“How to Index” (vol. 4) describes the different phases involved in the process of creating an index and thesauri, and using these tools to systematically index documents.

“How to Record Names of Persons” (vol. 5) provides instructions in recording names based on international standards developed in the field of librarianship.


The WINEVSYS database is a Microsoft Access version of the HURIDOCS Events Standard Formats which assists in organizing and maintaining historical data concerning victim(s), perpetrator(s), and event(s); WINEVSYS functions as an official historical record of acts and events, which can be later used as evidence by civil society tribunals or human rights commissions. WINEVSYS may be downloaded from the HURIDOCS website, and does not require an internet connection to maintain. There is no ability to encrypt data within WINEVSYS.

Web-based Tools

Specialized human rights “discovery tools” are not a recent development. In 1996, the AAAS Science and Human Rights Program launched the Directory of Human Rights Resources on the Internet. However, with the discontinuation of the AAAS Directory, HURISEARCH (http://www.hurisearch.org/), a pilot project developed by HURIDOCS in 2003 in collaboration with Human Rights Education Associates (HREA; http://www.hrea.org/), with funding from Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “provides one point access to all human rights information published by human rights organizations worldwide, and particularly human rights NGOs.”

To better serve the human rights community, HURIDOCS partnered with Fast Search & Transfer (FAST), a Norwegian based company, to develop HURISEARCH. HURISEARCH is considered a vertical search engine, which retrieves human rights based information published on the world-wide-web by human rights NGO organizations.
HURISEARCH is geared to locate a broad platform of human right related-information, including: peer-reviewed papers, theses, books, preprints, abstracts and technical reports from the Web and in print format. HURIDOCS is currently developing additional criteria for site inclusion.

**HURIDOCS Mailing Lists**

Currently, HURIDOCS is involved with two e-mail lists of importance to library and human rights workers:

huridocs-gen-l.
News and developments in the field of human rights information and documentation handling, including announcements of upcoming events, vacancies, new tools and techniques relevant for human rights documentation workers. To subscribe, send the message “subscribe huridocs-gen-l <your address>” to majordomo@mail.comlink.apc.org

huridocs-tech.
Covers technology aspects of human rights and how they may affect human rights information workers. To subscribe, send the message “subscribe huridocs-tech <your address>” to majordomo@hrea.org

In closing, it is through the sincere efforts of HURIDOCS that Martin Ennals’ idea of a “universal and homogenous system of handling information about human rights” is made real. In an increasingly tense and technological world, where information and human rights often collide, various HURIDOCS efforts link libraries and human rights organizations in their common goal of education and empowerment.

**Works Cited**


DEDICATION: This piece is dedicated to the memory of the late Sergio Vieira De Mello, U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights and U.N. Special Envoy, killed in Baghdad, August 19, 2003.

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