AAA Committee for Human Rights

5-Year Report

2008-2013

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Committee Charge

To promote and protect human rights; to expand the definition of human rights within an anthropological perspective; to work internally with the membership of the AAA, to educate anthropologists, and to mobilize their support for human rights; to work externally with foreign colleagues, the people and groups with whom anthropologists work, and other human rights organizations to develop an anthropological perspective on human rights and consult with them on human rights violations and the appropriate actions to be taken; to influence and educate the media, policy makers, non-governmental organizations, and decision makers in the private sector; to encourage research on all aspects of human rights from conceptual to applied.

Accomplishments

In the review period from 2008-2013, the Committee met the majority of its charge. Details of the following are in the annual reports on file. The Committee engaged broad groups of anthropologists to support human rights and research on it -- primarily through AAA conference activity, including panels, public forums, and workshops held on a yearly basis. Additionally, the regular column in Anthropology News was a venue for disseminating knowledge about a large variety human rights issues to the broader membership. And finally, CfHR promoted knowledge and educational materials about human rights violations through two major revampings of its website and through the development of a syllabi bank (which will soon be uploaded to the website for educator access). It is notable that many of these activities focused on human rights issues within the United States, in addition to other countries. CfHR also worked externally with foreign colleagues and other human rights-oriented organizations, mainly in the form of drafting letters of support for local organizations or people experiencing human rights abuses, or drafting letters condemnation of particular human rights abuses or risks to human rights. All letters are on file and posted on the website.
It is unclear whether or not CfHR is meeting its mandate of influencing and educating media, policy-makers, NGOS, and decision makers in the private sector, which is also part of its charge. The major exception is the CfHR’s endorsement of the “Drop the I-Word” campaign directed at media outlets in 2012, which resulted in the Associated Press’ decision to stop using the term “illegal” to refer to a person or to an immigrant. Any other direct effects of CfHR actions on the above entities are difficult to apprehend. The charge does not need to be modified or updated, but future CfHR activities should give more attention to this aspect.

The Committee provides a critical contribution to the AAA’s mission of disseminating “anthropological knowledge and its use to solve human problems.” Often our insights, as contained especially in Anthropology News columns and in letters to various parties, provide key expert knowledge that is geared towards solving the problem of violations of human rights. The Committee has also regularly served the membership of the Association by providing programming at the annual meetings, updates on human rights issues via the Anthropology News, and educational resources at the meetings and on its website. Furthermore, the Committee continues to be the main advocacy body to which anthropologists can bring human rights concerns. Members contact us with concerns via email or in the open forum at the AAA meetings.

Our committee is crucial to the Long Range Plan of the AAA because we are the main body responsible for applying the AAA Declaration on Anthropology and Human Rights. We are also a key body within the AAA that “foster[s] the discussion and dissemination of research on social and policy issues in the society at large, and respond in a timely fashion when events call for the application of relevant anthropological knowledge, expertise, and interpretation.”

In addition to the regular, yet critical, work of the CfHR in providing robust meeting content, disseminating information via Anthropology News and the website, and responding to members’ or other organizations’ calls for letters, the CfHR has several notable accomplishments in the past 5 years:

- A complete restructuring of the organization of the Committee to more effectively address its different activities
- Formulated an appropriate and productive response to the new Standard Operating Procedure issued by the Executive Board in 2009 regarding statements and letters. The CfHR held the unanimous view that aspects of this SOP were detrimental to the Committee’s work, so the CfHR developed a two-pronged procedure for letters. Letters which could meet the President’s approval and were not urgent would be sent for review to the President for endorsement by the whole association. Letters which met only the CfHR’s approval and/or were more urgent would be sent from the CfHR directly, without the endorsement of the association.
- Two major updates to the website to facilitate access to current, critical information and resources
- A major curriculum study of human rights-related programs and courses
Looking Forward

1. *Where does the committee go from here? What is your agenda?*

The CfHR is committed to maintaining its position as a site for assisting individuals and agencies who need an outlet for reporting specific infringements of human rights. That said, we acknowledge various points for improving the effectiveness and efficiency of this process:

- Better meet the charge of influencing and educating media, policy-makers, NGOS, and decision makers in the private sector.
- Make an even stronger website, and regularly update it.
- Provide more instruction to incoming members about how the various sub-committees and task groups work (improving institutional memory).
- Develop a list of anthropologists and AAA subgroups with regional expertise to assist in the development of human rights statements.
- Provide open access (i.e., free registration) to the AAA meetings and CfHR specific panels for individuals from agencies outside of the AAA.

2. *Are there changes we should make to the committee structure?*

Considering the dynamic nature of reviewing the wide variety of requests for support that the CfHR receives, we should consider streamlining the process by which we: review specific issues, investigate the validity of the particular claims involved, and vote on supporting those issues.

3. *Should there be any change in the way membership in the committee is determined? For example if members are appointed should they instead be elected and vice versa? Would a combination of appointed and elected membership be more productive?*

Determining committee membership according to the current procedures is sufficient. That said, it would benefit anyone who is newly elected or appointed to provide a statement that demonstrates an understanding of the CfHR policies and procedures.

4. *Where do you see yourselves in 5 years?*

The CfHR is an extremely active committee. The committee will continue to address a variety of human rights issues and broaden its network of support across the globe. The current emphasis on maximizing CfHR procedures for processing statements will result in a more efficient and systematic structure for promoting human rights. This also entails establishing more purposeful strategies for collaborating with local and global media outlets.
5. *How does the committee fit into future projects in the LRP?*

Based on the narrative listed above, the CfHR most closely aligns with the following objectives listed under the AAA LRP:

**Objective 2**
- The AAA will foster the discussion and dissemination of research on social and policy issues in the society at large, and respond in a timely fashion when events call for the application of relevant anthropological knowledge, expertise, and interpretation.

**Objective 6**
- The AAA will strengthen internal working relationships among its Sections and Committees and the Association Office by effectively communicating its organizational structure, its Long-Range Plan, and its financial and programmatic activities.

**Objective 7.6**
- To engage the media and other publics in order to demonstrate both the general relevance of anthropology to the understanding of the human condition and to promote the relevance of anthropological research and perspectives on specific, contemporary ethical, social, cultural and policy issues.

**Objective 10**
- The AAA will expand collegial and organizational collaboration across international and disciplinary boundaries.

**Objective 11**
- The AAA will respond to needs for anthropological knowledge, expertise, and interpretation in the wider society by identifying and using effective mechanisms for making such resources available through print, broadcast, online and other media.