

FIHRM-LA: Education on Human Rights in Latin American Museums

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FIHRM-LA has been launched as a project for encouraging Latin American museums to help their communities better understand their right to benefit from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

It is no news that museums are changing. Nowadays, we expect them to change even more. Museums, regardless of their field of action, can and should contribute to the well-being of their communities. One fundamental contribution would be to collaborate in the education of their public on respect and defence of their rights.

In line with that, Dr David Fleming has fostered the creation of a Latin America branch of the Federation of International Human Rights Museums (FIHRM), the organization he founded and chairs.

Dr Fleming has entrusted this task to Mr Guillermo Whpei, a board member of FIHRM and founder of the Museo Internacional para la Democracia, in Argentina.

Mr Whpei is an Argentine entrepreneur, born in 1967 to a family of Palestinian immigrants. He chairs the Fundación para la Democracia Internacional, a leading institution aimed at raising awareness on key issues such as Social Inclusion, Democracy and Peace. The Foundation is based in Rosario, 300 km from Buenos Aires, in an emblematic building which also houses the Museo Internacional para la Democracia.

The museum is an ambitious project, conceived as a venue for debates on Democracy and its dilemmas. It has a collection of over 1000 objects, which can be displayed in exhibitions committed to building a better Democracy.

This huge institutional complex is financially supported exclusively from the corporate social responsibility strategy established by Mr Whpei, who has now gone even further, making it possible for FIHRM-Latin America to add its contribution to the valuable work carried out by Human Rights Museums in the region.

Human Rights Museums around the world do address global phenomena such as xenophobia, racism, wars, authoritarianism, the drama of migrants. Nevertheless, even though the Declaration of Human Rights has a universal scope, its application and effectiveness vary throughout the different regions, depending on their culture, history and political circumstances.

Museums are venues where local histories and contexts are reflected. Human Rights Museums in Latin America have a common ground to share -it makes sense to get them to interact.

Human Rights Museums have been created in the region since the 1990's, after democratic stability was regained in countries such as Argentina, Uruguay, Chile, Peru.

Their aim was to keep alive the memory of the impact that dictatorships had on societies.

Most of those museums were created by organizations, survivors and relatives of the victims -lest people forget the horrors they had suffered.

The models for the missions and institutional profiles of these new museums were those of the museums created in Europe and North America after the Second World War, as a reminder of the unacceptable persecutions and extermination then perpetrated.

In the European model, the challenge was to convey the dramatic significance of having experienced Nazism, Fascism or Communism. In Latin America, the challenge has been to ensure that those born in Democracy, who have had no experience of dictatorships, can understand the full extent of losing it. The stories told by these two groups of museums are different, but they merge in their quest to reach the new generations.

Today, Human Rights museums in Latin America are focused on transmitting the memories of the recent past, with the purpose of building a future with full

rights for their communities. This, taking into account that even the societies that have left behind their authoritarian past, still report very high scores of violence and violation of the rights established in the Declaration of 1948.

Let's have a quick look at the Human Rights situation in Latin America. The figures mentioned in the next paragraphs are those published by Amnesty International in their 2017 report.

We are approaching December 2018, which means celebrating the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Despite that, it is undeniable that inequality is the norm throughout Latin America, as well as a widespread impunity in the face of high levels of violence, with waves of homicides, forced disappearances and arbitrary detentions.

Violence is extreme and persistent in El Salvador and Honduras. High numbers of homicides are perpetrated by the police in Brazil, Honduras, Dominican Republic. In Mexico, 34.000 people were still missing in 2017, and there is a wave of murder of journalists and human rights advocates. The internal conflict between the security forces and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) is far from over and -in some areas- seems to intensify. The people of Venezuela are subjected to a dictatorial government, which has led them to face the worst humanitarian crisis in their modern history. And it is well known that it is getting worse. Only in 2017 the repression of the protests caused more than 120 deaths.

The region has the highest rate in the world of non-intimate partner violence against

women, and the second highest rate of intimate partner violence. In Argentina there were at least 254 femicides in 2017.

In countries such as Haiti and Honduras, LGBTI people face persistent discrimination, harassment and violence. Indigenous peoples suffer discrimination and violence and continue to be denied their economic, social and cultural rights, including their rights to land ownership and to give their free, prior and informed consent on projects affecting them.

A very large number of people fled their homes to escape repression, violence, discrimination and poverty. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees more than 57.000 people from Honduras, Guatemala and El Sal-

vador applied for asylum abroad. In Haiti, almost 38.000 people are still internally displaced as a result of the 2010 earthquake. There were thousands of new cases of cholera.

It is estimated that 760.000 women receive treatment every year in Latin America due to complications arising from unsafe abortions. The Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Haiti, Honduras and Nicaragua maintain a total ban on abortion, even when the life of a pregnant woman or girl is in danger. In Argentina, women find it difficult to access a legal abortion, even when a pregnancy poses a risk to their health or is the result of rape. Full decriminalization of abortion was rejected by the Argentinian Congress.

All in all, how could Latin American museums help to change the societies described in that report?

FIHRM-LA intends **to promote knowledge of and respect for Human Rights in Latin-America through actions in museums**. Further, it aims at reaching not only Human Rights Museums: all museums, whatever their typology, are potential Human Rights Museums. Since all museums can, from their unique perspectives, refer to the rights and duties that regulate the lives of the audiences who visit them.

It is obvious that museums focus their activities on the topics that concern their typologies. Thus, art museums deal with art and beauty, and science museums deal with innovation. Yet, nowadays, the museums that manage to attract the largest audiences are those launching exhibitions that not only display their beautiful or historical collections, but that also move their audiences and encourage reflection on aspects of life.

We are reaching the end of the first quarter of the 21st. century. The digital revolution is pushing us from a stable and well-known structure to a new and temporary one. We all have to update or even re-format ourselves from time to time. If museums do not focus on identifying and reflecting the needs of the people, they will fail in their mission of service, at the risk of becoming mere entertainment providers or private temples for academics.

Museums need to be attractive to a wide range of audiences. This appeal can be achieved by creating exhibitions that are related to everyday experiences

and concerns, reflecting the multiplicity of voices and setting frameworks for respectful confrontation. This seems to point out that one of the most urgent challenges for our museums is to align their objectives with the needs of their communities.

An impossible task? A difficult challenge, but that is how museums would best serve.

FIHRM-LA's project got formal approval from David Fleming in May 2018. Then it was time to start contacting the 8 museums active members of FIHRM in the region. However, there are many more Human Rights Museums in Latin America. At least 57 are easily recognizable: 11 in Argentina, 4 in Bolivia, 5 in Brazil, 7 in Chile, 6 in Colombia, 6 in Mexico. In the other countries that make up the region -Costa Rica, Ecuador, Uruguay, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Dominican Republic- there are between 1 and 3. No information has been found about the existence of this type of museums in Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua and Venezuela.

The starting point will be to rally their support for the project, Nevertheless, for the entire region to benefit, it is necessary to aim beyond those targeted museums at those which are not Human Rights Museums. If they also get involved into interesting their audiences in the defence of Human Rights, this will translate into a wide network of people and institutions, rich in diversity and nationality. As a strategy, contacts were not initiated through formal institutional channels, but through colleagues with extensive experience in dealing with these issues and who were willing to assume the role of "FIHRM-LA's National correspondent" in their countries. Up to now, their commitment has been to contact museums and organizations and to help in handling updated information. The first replies and contributions started coming from Dominican Republic, Peru, Colombia, Chile, Mexico and Guatemala.

The network is growing and the web-site www.fihrm-la.org has been developed to inform and to encourage reflection by replicating a core of news of specific interest to Latin American museums and their public. It provides links to sources of information and to Institutions and Human Rights Museums, plus a calendar

of related events. To raise interest in visiting the website, interaction is promoted through weekly e-mails. Further, institutional activity is also released through Twitter and Instagram, both useful for reaching out and gathering opinions as well as for raising controversies and triggering debates.

In addition to the team's own positive vision, the project raised remarkable expectations during the annual FIHRM Conference as a model to be replicated in other regions.

The foundations for the development of FIHRM-LA are now laid, and the team is focused on identifying the most appropriate activities to reach FIHRM-LA's main objective: to help museums **educate** their public in respecting and defending the Fundamental Human Rights.

When conceiving FIHRM-LA, the chances of ever achieving such a goal were debated. Everyone wondered whether it is actually possible to **educate** in a museum. There is consensus that a person who visits a museum can certainly get information. But, apparently, education requires more than a single visit. It takes time to educate. Despite that, however, there are facts that seem to prove otherwise: we know that sometimes, when we see an object, we read a text, we hear a story... we can be moved, we can reflect, and we can even take a new turn in life. All those experiences are part of a process that may be called **education**. All those experiences often do take place in museums.

Exploring the nuances of providing education in museums took a whole year of research, of exchanging proposals, concerns and different approaches. Yet every step meant progress. FIHRM-LA is moving towards the goals set for 2019: an exhibition that will tour museums throughout the region, an award for outstanding initiatives and grants to enable attendance to specific events.

Everyone can participate. Every opinion counts. FIHRM-LA is accessible in the main social networks. FIHRM-LA looks forward to hearing from you too!