

Rights And Democracy

www.droitsdemocratie.net

National

WHO THEY ARE

Rights & Democracy (International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development) is a non-partisan organization with an international mandate. It was created by Canada's Parliament in 1988 to encourage and support the universal values of human rights and the promotion of democratic institutions and practices around the world.

Rights & Democracy works with individuals, organizations and governments in Canada and abroad to promote human and democratic rights defined in the United Nations' International Bill of Human Rights. Although its mandate is wide-ranging,

Rights & Democracy currently focuses on four themes: democratic development, women's human rights, globalization and human rights, and the rights of indigenous peoples.

R&D has appointed Rights and Democracy delegations in universities and colleges across Canada with the aim of spreading knowledge and awareness of human rights issues among students. R&D uses its knowledge and expertise to facilitate discussions among students, and between government and civil society.

Though the majority of R&D participants are youth, they do not restrict their operations to them. Rather, they engage any student wishing to get involved.

WHY WORK WITH STUDENTS?

“These are the people who will be at the forefront of human rights issues in the years to come. We want to make sure that when students graduate and go off to their respective fields, that they will integrate their knowledge of human rights as best they can into their work. It's important to foster an interest in human rights at a relatively early age so that the students sort of have it engrained in them when they graduate and will have good habits with regard to human rights when making decisions.” - Cynthia Gervais, Project Coordinator

HOW DO THEY PROMOTE THEMSELVES TO YOUTH

R&D does a good job at showing up and having a presence at conferences and events that have links to human rights and democracy. They follow one of golden rules of engaging youth, which is simply to go where youth are, and to show them how your organization is relevant to the main event. R&D has presented itself at various events from conferences and panel discussions, to job fairs and even refugee simulations.

When meeting a group of youth for the first time, R&D prefers to engage smaller groups. This is because they view the more personal approach to be more effective, particularly for youth who feel shy asking questions in front of large audiences. A smaller and more comfortable group allows youth to feel more comfortable in making inquiries and also heightens their level of attention, and feeling of inclusion with the group. In a larger group, people will feel less of a “connection” to the speaker, and as a result will be less likely to make inquiries and be more likely to zone out.

This approach to youth engagement runs parallel to R&D's slogan: "Never doubt that a small group can change the world". A young person who had a more complete and intimate experience from a small group discussion is more likely to retain more from the experience, and then be better able to share what he or she learned with peers. This is not to discount the possibility that a large group can have a meaningful experience as well, but usually it requires much more than the average organization can muster.

WHAT ADVICE DO THEY SHARE?

Youth often approach R&D with all sorts of questions and concerns about human rights projects that they can get involved in.

"They're often surprised when I say "what do you want us to do for you" rather than "this is what I want you to do for me." - Cynthia Gervais, Project Coordinator

Most youth come thinking that if they want to get involved, they're going to have to follow someone else's initiative and not have much of a say of their own. The possibility of creating a project can surprise them and subsequently turn them on.

"One of the keys is to hire a dedicated staff, that is willing to foster a genuine relationship with the youth being introduced to the organization. If the relationship between the youth and the adults in the organization is strong, their projects are much more likely to succeed. Find ways to show youth that you appreciate their input and hard work, either through rewards, or simple praise. There is no better representation of a project than its people."

- Cynthia Gervais, Project Coordinator

WHAT THE YOUTH FRIENDLY GUIDE SAYS

The Youth Friendly Guide specifies some of the numerous benefits for organizations when they engage youth successfully:

- 1) Youth that are well mentored and integrated into an organization are more likely to remain with that organization, helping ensure that the organization grows and lasts into the future.
- 2) Youth are often the ones in an organization who are the most idealistic and energetic. As such, they become, in a sense,, the "keepers of the vision", helping the organization stay on track and promote itself in new and interesting ways.
- 3) Youth enable the organization to be more responsive to the needs of youth and young adults in the wider community.