

DTP Acceptance Speech for ADHRA – 2019

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Acknowledgements: Your Excellencies, President Tsai Ing-wen, Chairman Su Jia-chyuan, Secretary General Lee, Deputy Minister Hsu, Taiwan Foundation for Democracy, President Liao, distinguished guests, friends and colleagues. Thank you. Happy Human Rights Day.

Thank you also for the lovely welcome, for your speech and kind words, President Tsai and for the wonderful and moving Indigenous cultural performance and songs. It was moving. In Australia every special and official occasion begins with a Welcome to Country from the land's traditional owners, and acknowledgement of the Indigenous peoples and their continuing rights in relation to the land. So this welcome here in Taiwan was very special for us.

I would like to begin by thanking the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy and the Asia Democracy and Human Rights Award Committee for their kindness in recognising the Diplomacy Training Program's contribution to the human rights movements in Asia over 30 years. Please let me also convey the thanks and appreciation of the Diplomacy Training Program's Founder and Patron, and Nobel Peace Laureate, Jose Ramos-Horta.

To receive this award on international Human Rights Day, as the Diplomacy Training Program marks its 30th Anniversary, is special beyond words. To be in the same company as the courageous and inspiring individuals and organisations who have previously received this award is humbling – and a source of considerable pride. It is the work of these individuals and organisations, and others like them, that motivates and drives the work that we do in the Diplomacy Training Program, serving and supporting the human rights movements in Asia, the Pacific and beyond.

The name of the Diplomacy Training Program does not make the work that we do obvious. I feel the need to explain it, to tell its story.

This work began 30 years ago, in 1989, when The Diplomacy Training Program was established as a collaboration between a human rights activist/diplomat, José Ramos-Horta and an activist/academic, Professor Garth Nettheim. It began with a conversation between them at a party, on the fringes of an international meeting on the rights of Indigenous peoples, about the need to invest in building the knowledge and skills of human rights defenders. José Ramos-Horta knew this from his own experience.

José Ramos-Horta had been appointed Foreign Minister of a newly and very briefly independent Timor-Leste in 1975, and immediately tasked with taking his country's situation to the UN. Neither his advocacy nor international law stopped the invasion of his country. But José Ramos-Horta did not stop or give up. By 1989 he had spent 15 years in exile tirelessly advocating for the human rights of the Timorese, and for their right to self-determination. His cause, to all outside and neutral observers, looked hopeless.

Yet, José persisted. Over the years he learnt the hard way, through experience, the need for human rights defenders and activists to learn the law, the skills of diplomats, to build support inside and

beyond governments, to make friends and build relationships. He saw the growing power of global civil society that could provide solidarity and move governments to implement the standards and principles that they had adopted.

While he was learning the hard way, José Ramos-Horta saw many other advocates with just causes failing because they did not know the laws, did not understand the systems, and lacked the skills and confidence to engage with others.

José Ramos-Horta saw the value of investing in “peoples’ diplomacy” for human rights – the power of people working together on shared values, across borders, acting strategically and engaging in dialogue. He saw the need for a practical human rights training program, so the voices of the marginalised and excluded would be heard. He called it the Diplomacy Training Program.

Professor Garth Nettheim made a “home” for the Diplomacy Training Program at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, and UNSW Sydney continues to contribute to our work in many ways, including through the contributions of leading human rights academics. We thank and acknowledge them.

From the beginning we have focused on the “human” in human rights. From the beginning the Diplomacy Training Program’s work has been grounded in a profound respect and appreciation for the knowledge, perspectives and experience of human rights defenders working on the ground in Asia and the Pacific – on the frontline of the critical issues affecting their societies. Human rights standards are human responses to the reality of human wrongs. They express shared values of human dignity as well as the commitments made by governments. They are tools to be used.

While governments weigh human rights with other considerations, it is in human hearts that the power of human rights lives, as feelings of, empathy, care, and love for others.

The Diplomacy Training Program acknowledges individuals, whatever their role, have the potential to make a difference for human rights, for the rights of other people. We also understand that change comes when people work together, finding common cause.

José Ramos-Horta was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1996. In 1999, 20 years ago, he witnessed his people exercise their right to self-determination. For the Timorese it was a time when, in the words of the Irish poet Seamus Heaney, “hope and history rhymed”. In making the seemingly impossible become possible, in ending decades of severe human rights violations, the people of Timor-Leste offer their own hope and inspiration to others. Just as we have heard today of the struggles and successes of Taiwan’s movements for democracy and human rights.

There are many other inspiring stories of change, of victories large and small across Asia. We hear of them from DTP’s alumni and participants, as practical lessons are shared. We see the many setbacks too. We see that hope, commitment, courage, creativity, collaboration, persistence, kindness and love are the essential ingredients of human rights work, of movement building, of resilience. We understand that gains in human rights are rarely, if ever, permanent, or assured. We must keep building our movements, across borders and generations.

From the Diplomacy Training Program’s first program with 25 participants in 1990, we have now grown a network of many partners, trainers and over 3000 alumni.

We are often asked about the impact of our work and I like a story of evaluation that I read about some years ago – I think it is a famous one – of sunflowers and oak trees. The drive to see immediate impacts would see us just planting sunflowers – so quickly spectacular, and beautiful, but short-lived, rather than acorns that slowly become oak trees, growing in strength over time.

It seems to me, that in our work we must plant both sunflowers and oak trees, to respond to urgent and long-term needs, to protect human rights defenders now, and to build societies with strong human rights cultures into the future. It is also good to plant bamboo – which grows fast – and is strong, because it bends in storms without breaking. And it grows best together. It is resilient.

We do not always see the immediate results of what we do, but wherever we look we see DTP's 3000 plus alumni active in the human rights and democracy movements across Asia - in the movements challenging religious intolerance and discrimination, promoting the rights of women and gender equality, asserting the rights of Indigenous peoples, holding corporations accountable for their impacts, defending the environment, affirming the rights of migrant workers in countries of origin and destination, and the rights of persons with "disability", protesting censorship. We see them in the movements defending democracy and the right to participate in decision making and demanding action on the climate emergency. Across their different issues, concerns, countries and generations, we see them find common cause in human rights.

DTP's work is a collective effort – of a small organisation with many friends. We acknowledge with deep appreciation DTP's partner and friends in Migrant Forum in Asia, FORUM Asia and Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact. We will use this award to grow these partnerships and movements, as we also look forward to also building a new partnership and collaboration with the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy.

This award is truly a wonderful and practical expression of support for the human rights movement in Asia. In accepting this year's award on behalf of DTP, in joining the earlier recipients of the award, we dedicate the award to the work of DTP's trainers, alumni and the courageous human rights defenders who often risk so much and for whom international Human Rights Day has special meaning. It is in their commitment and efforts that our hopes for the future of human rights reside.

We accept the responsibility that comes with the award to redouble our efforts to support human rights movements in Asia at this challenging time. Thank you.

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