Amnesty International hosted the first meeting of the Asia Pacific Amnesty International Forum in Sydney from 28 June to 1 July 2003. On 30 June the Forum held a session on capacity building and Managing Director of Amnesty International Australia, Mara Moustafine, invited four speakers: Professor Julian Disney, University of New South Wales, Joan Staples, former Executive Director of the Diplomacy Training Program at UNSW, Kieren Fitzpatrick, Director of the Asia Pacific Forum of National Human Rights Institutions and Roland Rich, Director of the Centre for Democratic Institutions. Amnesty International is a key pillar in the architecture of global civil society. But institutions including NGOs are only as effective as the skills of their members permit them to be. The meeting was therefore intended to focus attention on means and processes of building human rights capacity in the region.

Julian Disney spoke about his advocacy work as President of the International Council on Social Welfare and the critical importance of finding the right regional architecture in which to pursue organizational objectives. Joan Staples provided a number of case studies on how individuals were able to gain the skills necessary to pursue their goals. Networking was a key part of this process. Kieren Fitzpatrick described the work of the Asia Pacific Forum of National Human Rights Institutions including the thematic workshops it conducted and the training it provided. The thematic workshops cover issues such as economic rights, human rights education, HIV-AIDS, disability, gender and NGOs while training is provided in investigative techniques.

Roland Rich described the training work undertaken by CDI for parliaments, judiciaries, media and civil society. Basically, CDI was engaged in a form of adult education and CDI's experience was that adults learn not because they are required to learn but because they want to learn. This fundamental distinction has a critical impact on the techniques and processes used in training programs. The simple didactic method of classroom delivery is not appropriate as the sole adult education method though it can play a useful role in setting the right intellectual and technical context for the learning experience.
CDI works with a particular type of adult - one who has significant professional achievements. This again influences the type of learning techniques that are used. On the one hand it means that programs can work on the happy assumption that the participants will be intelligent and knowledgeable, on the other it means there must also be an anticipation that they will demand high standards. Learning processes therefore have to be highly relevant, have to hold participants' attention and have to be enjoyable.

Two key tools are used by CDI to achieve this outcome, usually in combination: peer learning and experiential learning. Peer learning is based on the premise that people in high level positions will tend to want to interact with and learn from other people in similar positions. Accordingly, CDI programs bring together parliamentarians with other parliamentarians and judges with other judges. In this regard Australia is in a very good position to be of assistance in that Australia's governance capital is very strong. Experiential learning at its most rigorous is to place people in host institutions to undertake the responsibilities of that job. Such placements can occasionally be engineered but people holding high position rarely have the luxury of time and instead the experiential process has to be built through observation of the institutions at work and subsequent discussion with the protagonists.

The difficulties inherent in this process are that peers may not be good trainers and the underlying rules and conventions of the way institutions function may not be immediately apparent. CDI adds value to the process by filling in the gaps - directing the peer hosts to focus on certain matters and explaining to visitors aspects that are not readily apparent. CDI also adds value in ensuring that the experience is culturally sensitive and politically relevant. This requires a good knowledge of the culture and political system of the country in question as well as some understanding of the learning culture of that society. Some societies have more interactive learning cultures while others have more passive processes. The right balance needs to be found for a fulfilling learning process.

In any adult learning process there is a need to plan the best approach and reach a good balance between discussion and observation, listening to and delivering talks, and providing accessible materials without drowning visitors in paper. The process is most effective when it is a two way dialogue with both hosts and visitors learning from each other. In a number of projects CDI has attempted to construct South/South learning dynamics whereby people from one developing country share their experiences with people from another. One example in a field parallel to human rights is the work undertaken to allow Indonesian election observers to see how NAMFREL in the Philippines acted as watchdogs for the 2001 Congressional elections. Another example is the recent training course for journalists in the Solomon Islands delivered by the PNG Media Council.
In this specialised adult education field there are no templates. Every activity needs individual thought and attention based on the particular situation and the objectives of the training process. Where the training process is intended to reach a wider audience different techniques will be necessary. For civic education programs in the Pacific, CDI has used techniques such as preparing discussion material for learning circles, commissioning katun buk (cartoon books) of political satire for PNG, and working with street theatre groups. One of the keys to success is having a good interlocutor who can point the project in the right direction.

The discussion that followed the presentations was lively with issues ranging from women's rights, the question of Islam and human rights in South East Asia and role and posture that an organisation such as Amnesty International should adopt.