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A Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA) in Practice: Evaluating NGO Development Efforts

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Human rights-based approaches (HRBAs) promise greater alignment of development efforts with universal norms, as well as a focus on the root causes of poverty. While HRBAs have been widely adopted across the development sector, there is little systematic evidence about the actual impact of this strategic shift. Evaluating the effectiveness of HRBAs is challenging because various non-governmental and other organizations have developed very different understandings of how to apply a rights-based framework in the development context. This essay takes a step toward the rigorous evaluation of HRBAs by offering a comprehensive review of rights-based programming implemented by Plan International, a child-centered organization. It shows that Plan's adoption of HRBA-inspired strategies has transformed its interactions with local communities and added an explicit focus on the state as the primary duty bearer. There is evidence for a systematic increase in individual rights awareness, greater ownership exercised by community organizations, and the application of evidence-based advocacy aimed at scaling up proven program activities. But Plan's peculiar brand of HRBA neglects collaboration with domestic social movements and civil society, largely avoids a more confrontational approach towards the state, and has yet to produce evidence for regular successful rights claims by disadvantaged communities against governmental representatives at local, regional, or national levels. The study also reveals a limited ability of Plan to address disparities and discrimination within local communities, as well as a need to define clearly the organization's own accountability and duties deriving from its presence in local communities across more than fifty developing nations.

Human rights-based approaches (HRBAs) to development have become the new and dominant norm among most development organizations over the past decade. Although the story of the emergence of HRBAs is often told from the top-down, the shift was primarily driven from the bottom up and emerged as a result of broader shifts, including the progressive indigenization of development non-governmental organizations (NGO) staff and the increasing profile of social movements, especially in the Latin American context. At the global level, these local shifts were matched by perceptions of past failures of aid programs,[1] a significant increase in aid flows to NGOs,[2] and the diffusion of the human rights discourses among development organizations.[3] Conversely, traditional human rights organizations, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, which had largely ignored economic and social rights throughout much of their activities during the Cold War, now began to embrace the indivisibility of all human rights more forcefully.[4]

HRBA became a global norm in 2003 when United Nations agencies active in the development field adopted the *Common Understanding on Human Rights-Based Approaches to Development Cooperation and Programming*.[5] This document served two specific purposes. First, it aided in aligning efforts of those UN agencies which had already implemented for some time a rights-based approach in their development work. Leading in this regard was the child-focused specialized agency UNICEF, which had adopted a rights-based approach in 1997, declaring that its work would now be based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Second, the document stipulated that its main goal was to mainstream human rights throughout the entire United Nations and its specialized agencies.

A similar picture emerges when looking at the diffusion of HRBAs among international NGOs active in the development field. Some of the early adopters, including Oxfam and CARE, committed to it in the late 1990s, but the large majority only joined after 2003. By 2005/6, the HRBA norm reached its "tipping point" and many major bilateral aid agencies based in Europe,[6] as well as groups such as ActionAid and Save the Children, had come on board. The late-comers likely joined because not doing so would have put them outside of the rhetorical

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1. William R. Easterly, *The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006).

2. Sam Hickey and Diana Mitlin, eds., *Rights-Based Approaches to Development: Exploring the Potential and Pitfalls* (Sterling, VA: Kumarian Press, 2009).

3. Peter Uvin, *Human Rights and Development* (Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press, 2004).

4. Paul J. Nelson and Ellen Dorsey, *New Rights Advocacy: Changing Strategies of Development and Human Rights NGOs* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2008).

5. The United Nations established the HRBA portal to offer resources on the mainstreaming of the human rights-based approach as well as the facilitation of inter-agency collaboration focused on HRBAs (http://hrbaportal.org/).

6. Laure-Hélène Piron, *Learning from the UK Department for International Development's Rights-Based Approach to Development Assistance* (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2003).

consensus among their peers, but a few significant aid organizations, including USAID, have never adopted a HRBA.

HRBAs seek to frame poverty in the language of international human rights standards and transform passive recipients of aid into empowered rights-holders. The human rights frame provides legitimacy to the development community by putting their efforts in line with universally shared and recognizable norms. External actors no longer substitute for absent government services, but focus instead on mobilizing individuals, civil society, and the legal system to hold the state as the primary duty bearer accountable. From an HRBA perspective, poverty is not primarily due to a lack of resources, but a result of discrimination and political decisions of those holding power. HRBA also represents an important check against tendencies to neglect the poorest and most marginalized in development efforts designed to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that lack a basis in international human rights norms.[7] HRBA seeks to create positive effects at all stages of development efforts, changing how programs are designed, implemented, and evaluated.

But while HRBA has been a rhetorical success, three major and related challenges have emerged questioning their relevance and future viability. First, resistance to the implementation of HRBA-related activities persists across all parties involved, including local communities, NGO workers in the field, fundraising offices, and donors. Each of these groups has different motives in rejecting the HRBA frame, but their combined resistance presents a key challenge to any further progress. Second, increased demands for evidence-based reporting and quantifiable results championed by donors and NGO watchdogs[8] alike often undermine the application of HRBA. For example, searching for underlying causes of poverty, engaging in reflective processes with beneficiaries, or sustained advocacy for policy change may all be called for under HRBA, but find little acceptance among increasingly result-oriented donors.[9] Third, some of the named skepticism towards HRBA is driven by the persistent lack of systematic evidence about the results of

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7. Ellen Dorsey, Mayra Gómez, Bret Thiele, and Paul Nelson, "Millennium Development Rights," *Monday Developments* 29 (2011): 17–18, Malcolm Langford, "A Poverty of Rights: Six Ways to Fix the MDGs," *IDS Bulletin* 41 (2010): 83–91.

8. The practice of rating NGOs only based on financial health has been widely criticized by practitioners and scholars alike; see George E. Mitchell, *Watchdog Study: Reframing the Discussion about Nonprofit Effectiveness* (Washington, DC: DMA Nonprofit Federation, 2010), and Ann Goggins Gregory and Don Howard, "The Nonprofit Starvation Cycle," *Stanford Social Innovation Review* 7 (2009): 48–53. In response, Charity Navigator, one of the main NGO watchdogs operating in the United States, has begun to expand its rating system to also include information about levels of accountability and transparency as well as actual results of program activities; for an update on the methodology, see Charity Navigator's methodology section at www.charitynavigator.org and Ken Berger's blog at www.kenscommentary.org/.

9. Paul Gready, "Reasons to Be Cautious about Evidence and Evaluation: Rights-based Approaches to Development and the Emerging Culture of Evaluation," *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 1 (2009): 380–401.

HRBA programming. While some scholars have used limited case studies to offer both positive and negative evaluations of HRBA,[10] more systematic and comparative studies remain rare.[11]

This study addresses this empirical gap by summarizing new evidence from a meta-evaluation of HRBA programming activities implemented by one major development NGO, Plan International, in more than two dozen countries and hundreds of local communities.[12] Plan International, founded in 1937 to aid child victims of the Spanish Civil War, today works primarily in local communities in over fifty developing nations and generates its revenue from child sponsorships and grant funding provided by multilateral and government agencies. Plan's budget in 2009–10 was close to $700 million U.S. dollars. Key areas of its activities are health, education, child participation, protection from violence, and sexual health. Similar to many other development NGOs, most of the revenue is generated by country offices in Europe and North America, while the majority of poverty-related activities take place in the developing world.

There are two main reasons to claim that Plan International's experience in adopting HRBA programming is a crucial case to study. First, Plan is representative of a majority of traditional development organizations that have defined their missions as largely incompatible with contentious advocacy or other strategies typically associated with advancing human rights. To understand the effects of the diffusion of HRBAs throughout large parts of the development community, it is crucial to study the effects on those organizations that are relative "late adopters" and exhibit an organizational culture not necessarily favorable to the new norm. This approach avoids a selection bias in favor of finding effective HRBA applications based on studying the most likely early adopters of a new norm. Second, Plan largely avoids legal challenges to persistent gaps between the legal recognition of

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10. Habib Mohammad Zafarullah and Mohammad Habibur Rahman, "Human Rights, Civil Society and Nongovernmental Organizations: The Nexus in Bangladesh," *Human Rights Quarterly* 24 (2002): 1011–34; Mac Darrow and Amparo Tomas, "Power, Capture, and Conflict: A Call for Human Rights Accountability in Development Cooperation," *Human Rights Quarterly* 27 (2005): 471–538; Alessandra Lundström Sarelin, "Human Rights-Based Approaches to Development Cooperation, HIV/AIDS, and Food Security," *Human Rights Quarterly* 29 (2007): 460–88; Benjamin Mason Meier and Ashley M. Fox, "Development as Health: Employing the Collective Right to Development to Achieve the Goals of the Individual Right to Health," *Human Rights Quarterly* 30 (2008): 259–355.

11. Three exceptions include Shannon Kindornay, James Ron, and Charli Carpenter, "Rights-Based Approaches to Development: Implications for NGOs," *Human Rights Quarterly* 34 (2012): 472–506; Sheena Crawford, *The Impact of Rights-Based Approaches to Development: Bangladesh, Malawi and Peru* (London: UK Interagency Group on Human Rights Based Approaches, 2007); and Gready, "Reasons to Be Cautious."

12. Tosca Bruno-van Vijfeijken, Uwe Gneiting, Hans Peter Schmitz, and Otto Valle, *Rights-Based Approach to Development: Learning from Guatemala* (Syracuse, NY: Moynihan Institute of Global Affairs, 2009); Tosca Bruno-van Vijfeijken, Uwe Gneiting, and Hans Peter Schmitz, *How does CCCD Affect Program Effectiveness and Sustainability? A Meta Review of Plan's Evaluations* (Syracuse, NY: Moynihan Institute of Global Affairs, 2011).

rights and their actual enforcement.[13] While much attention regarding HRBAs has been focused on the adoption of legal strategies (see also the Gauri/Gloppen article in this issue of *Polity*), this case focuses on the more unusual application of human rights norms in the local context as part of a predominantly community-based strategy supplemented by some efforts to engage in collaborative and evidence-based advocacy at the national level.

The results presented here are based on a meta-analysis of thirty-eight single program evaluations and four global evaluations on program effectiveness, all completed between 2007 and 2010. These documents included all program evaluations in the areas of education, health, and water and sanitation. Although Plan adopted a version of HRBA for its program activities in 2003, a review of program evaluations prior to 2007 showed limited evidence of the presence of HRBA, either because its application was limited or because the evaluations failed to pay sufficient attention to this shift. Post-2007 evaluations reflected a more consistent application of HRBA both in program activities and evaluation practices. After a systematic review of common trends across the selected evaluations, ten were selected for follow-up phone interviews with Plan staff based in country offices in Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, and Latin America. These interviews were conducted with individuals directly involved in the program activities (not their evaluation) and served the purpose of obtaining additional information not conveyed in the written documentation.

The implementation of HRBA remains a work-in-progress in Plan as well as many other NGOs. For example, Plan is continuously expanding its HRBA training of staff and uses program- and meta-evaluations to develop and apply more consistent practices based on the basic premises of a rights-based approach to development. As a result, this evaluation provides an assessment of an incomplete application of HRBA by an organization with little to no prior experience with human rights advocacy. From Plan's perspective, HRBA has produced improved results, primarily by instigating more pronounced behavior change by community members and by encouraging community participation to improve access and quality to services. HRBA has also led the organization to engage the state more directly as a primary duty bearer, for example by using evidence-based advocacy to effectively scale up successful community programs to be adopted elsewhere. A more critical reading of the observed effects emphasizes that many of these gains have come as a result of engaging communities and the state *separately*, without necessarily creating a self-sustaining accountability link between rights holders and duty bearers. Additional progress towards a more complete application of HRBA would require considering more contentious

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13. Craig Johnson and Timothy Forsyth, "In the Eyes of the State: Negotiating a 'Rights-Based Approach' to Forest Conservation in Thailand," *World Development* 30 (2002): 1591–1605.

advocacy tactics when they are appropriate, as well as a systematic engagement with domestic civil society as an intermediary between the state and local communities.[14]

The article is organized as follows. The first section provides a brief overview of HRBA and its diffusion in the development sector. The main point here is to highlight the different interpretations of HRBA prevalent across organizations. The main empirical sections focus on how HRBA affects (1) the planning, (2) the implementation, and (3) the outcomes of development interventions. The conclusions summarize the strengths and weaknesses of the current application of HRBA as a development strategy and focus on developing additional steps that will increase the positive impact of a rights-based understanding of poverty.

Human Rights and Development

The advantages of re-framing development challenges in the language of human rights have been well described in the literature.[15] In theory, infusing human rights into the development discourses has far-reaching consequences and, if taken seriously, not only politicizes the role of external actors but fundamentally transforms relations between donors, NGOs, local governments, and beneficiaries.[16] For external actors serious about adopting a rights perspective, it first entails broadening the focus of engagement to a set of indivisible social, economic, political, and civil rights. The emphasis shifts from alleviating a lack of resources through external service delivery to addressing power inequalities as root causes of poverty. Beneficiaries are no longer passive aid recipients, but should become active rights holders,[17] while local and national governments emerge as primary duty bearers.[18] The role of development organizations changes from service delivery and charity to facilitating a relationship of accountability between rulers and the ruled.

An HRBA framework uses participatory approaches not merely for instrumental purposes in the name of improved program outcomes, but also views participation as a value in its own right, including encouraging independent claims by individuals and local communities towards their local and national governments. While rights in the context of development aid serve as a means to end poverty, they also represent an end in themselves. Norms such as non-discrimination and inclusion take on more importance and adopting HRBA requires developing a

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14. John Gaventa and Rosemary McGee, *Citizen Action and National Policy Reform: Making Change Happen* (London: Zed Books, 2010).

15. Uvin, *Human Rights and Development*.

16. Ibid., 179.

17. Jennifer Chapman. *Rights-based Development: The Challenge of Change and Power* (London: ActionAid International, 2005).

18. Paul Gready, "Rights-Based Approaches to Development: What is the Value-Added?" *Development in Practice* 18 (2008): 735–47.

multi-level approach capable of addressing the complex nature of poverty at the local, national, and (sometimes) international levels. Finally, successful HRBA efforts have to rely on strategic alliances whereby human rights serve as a universal platform and common language bridging existing gaps between the traditionally separate realms occupied by development and human rights NGOs.

While the shift towards HRBA offers many opportunities to address poverty issues in new ways, NGOs have taken very different approaches in implementing rights-based understandings in their development work. Intergovernmental organizations have been much more reluctant in adopting HRBA frames, primarily because many of their principals (states) resist the proliferation of the human rights framework for various reasons. Among development NGOs, the rhetorical adoption of HRBA frames is now widespread, although each organization has developed their own version of it and its application across countries and programs varies significantly. Scholars have begun to identify some of the differences across HRBA frames used,[19] for example by distinguishing populist (ActionAid), campaign-driven (Oxfam), legalist (Save the Children),[20] and community-focused versions (Plan). But even within each of the main development organizations, definitions and degrees of implementation of HRBA vary greatly depending on the knowledge and receptiveness of country staff, the degree of political openness afforded by the government, and the attitudes of local communities towards rights-based mobilization (Table 1).

Plan International's Community-Based HRBA

This essay reviews a particular version of HRBA, which was adopted in 2003 by Plan International under the label of *Child-Centered Community Development* (*CCCD*). Unlike heavily campaign- and advocacy-oriented HRBA, the focus of CCCD remains at the community level with expanded efforts of evidence-based advocacy aimed at scaling up successful local interventions. Occasionally, Plan country offices will enter into broader alliances aimed at advocating for policy change at the national level, but the main focus of CCCD is the community level and a strategy of linking communities directly to government agencies responsible for services, including education, health, or water/sanitation. Core principles of CCCD include a child focus, explicit focus on international human rights standards, accountability, inclusion/non-discrimination, gender equality, and

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19. Srirak Plipat, *Developmentizing Human Rights: How Development NGOs Interpret and Implement a Human Rights-based Approach to Development Policy* (University of Pittsburgh, Doctoral Thesis, 2005).

20. Jonathan Menkos, Ignacio Saiz, and Maria Jose Eva, *Rights or Privileges? Fiscal Commitment to the Rights to Health, Education and Food in Guatemala* (Madrid/Guatemala City: Instituto Centroamericano de Estudios Fiscales and The Center for Economic and Social Rights, 2009).

Table 1
Targets and Strategies of HRBA Efforts

Targets of HRBA efforts	Strategies	Tools/tactics
State	Legal enforcement	Court cases, filing claims
	Advocacy for policy change	Research, lobbying
	Capacity building	Funding, training of government personnel
	Awareness raising	Education about rights
Political parties	Advocacy	Research, lobbying
	Capacity building	Training
	Awareness raising	Education about rights
Civil society	Coalition building	Networking
	Capacity building	Funding, training
	Awareness raising	Education about rights
Local communities	Participation	Encouraging rights claims and feedback from beneficiaries
	Capacity building	Training of volunteer groups
	Awareness raising	Education about rights, peer pressure

participation.[21] Strategies highlighted by Plan to advance those principles include (1) anchoring programs in communities, (2) emphasizing accountability of state actors, (3) strengthening civil society capacity, (4) advocating for policy change, (5) using partnerships for greater impact, and (6) engaging the corporate sector.[22] Program outcomes are defined in terms of positive behavior change, improved access and quality of services, equity, and sustainability of any improvements accomplished.[23]

In the subsequent discussion, two questions are addressed: First, which principles and strategies come to the fore as Plan International modifies its development efforts? Second, what are the strengths and limits of those strategies in affecting (1) program planning, (2) program implementation, and, most importantly, (3) outcomes and impact? The focus is on *if* and *how* a distinct rights-based approach

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21. Irko Zuurmond, ed., *Promoting Child Rights to End Child Poverty* (Woking, UK: Plan International, 2010).

22. Bruno-van Vijfeijken, Gneiting, and Schmitz, *Meta Review*, 6.

23. Plan International, *Global Effectiveness Framework* (Woking, UK: Plan International, 2008).

contributes to enhancements in planning, implementation, and results. Before moving to the assessment of current HRBA efforts, it is important to note that program evaluations provide an inherently limited evidentiary basis, primarily because of the lack of common standards that would facilitate the inquiry. This poses challenges in determining the extent to which HRBA measures were implemented, as well as isolating the effects of specific strategies across very different local contexts. For example, programs may not only implement widely different notions of community participation, but evaluators may also have very different expectations of community involvement shaping their assessments.

Effects on Program Planning: HRBA Framing

HRBAs affect program planning by prescribing an explicitly political explanation of poverty. The problem is not primarily a lack of resources, but forms of structural inequality, exclusion, and discrimination. Framing poverty as a violation of universally accepted rights privileges strategies aimed at addressing structural patterns of inequality. During planning stages, HRBAs require a focus on the most excluded and marginalized, rather than the most accessible or "promising" populations. Typically, any HRBA-related activity begins with a situational analysis, which seeks to identify the most vulnerable sections of a society or community and some of the structural causes of exclusion and marginalization. Such more detailed preparation promises not only better targeting of interventions, but also more appropriate choices of strategies addressing the underlying problems. While proponents of HRBA highlight these planning stages as crucial in ensuring program success, more skeptical views see the most important limits of the approach arising in the design stages and claim that there is little evidence to assume "that rights-based approaches can directly assist with the more detailed activities of development agencies, such as prioritization and planning."[24]

In the case of Plan International, the organization decided to continue its main focus on community involvement and add primarily a state-level focus to its strategies. Program evaluations completed between 2007 and 2010 reveal that Plan country offices predominately targeted the community level (45.8 percent) and the state level (40.2 percent), while CCCD strategies aimed at civil society (7.5 percent) or across different levels (6.5 percent) remained rare.[25] Planning phases now include situational analyses, which are more sensitive to issues of inequality, including greater attention to excluded communities such as indigenous populations. This shift had also some positive impact on expanding community

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24. Hickey and Mitlin, *Rights-Based Approaches to Development*, 225.
25. Bruno-van Vijfeijken, Gneiting, and Schmitz, *Meta Review*, 11.

participation during the design of programs, rather than previous practices of limiting participation to the stages of implementation or ex-post evaluation.

The main challenges related to program planning within HRBAs primarily relate to the consistency and translation of the situational analysis. The full inclusion of community members in the planning of programs remains the exception and findings from the situational analyses often fail to shape program development and implementation.[26] There are a number of reasons for this mixed picture, some of which are under Plan's control. First, HRBA sharply increases the level of ambition of development interventions and requires additional expertise among staff related to analyzing root causes of poverty and developing advocacy strategies. In Plan's case, the review revealed a gap between the rhetorical adoption of rights-based language and the development and diffusion of standards aiding country offices to apply HRBA in a consistent fashion. Second, translating a situational analysis into practice may be limited by factors such as geography or the political environment. Most vulnerable populations may be very hard to reach geographically, which negatively affects efficiency. More importantly, Plan's relative neglect of civil society mobilization or campaigns limits the strategic toolset to a more non-confrontational approach in dealing with governments, even if a situational analysis would suggest a more outspoken approach to enforce state accountability.

There is sufficient evidence from the analysis of Plan's more recent program activities across more than two dozen developing nations showing a measurable positive effect of rights-based ideas on program design. The emphasis of specific principles and application of associated strategies is uneven, as individual country offices experiment with a new way of framing their mission. The state as a primary duty bearer is now solidly a focus of analysis and Plan's relationships with communities have changed significantly. But there remains much room for expanding the participation of community members in program design, ensuring that the most discriminated members of society are a focal point, and refusing to accept excuses of government officials unwilling to fulfill obligations in the areas of health, education, or water/sanitation.

Effects on Implementation Practices: HRBA Strategies

HRBA sets out specific principles as a new basis for development efforts, but it does not prescribe strategies for their implementation. Many development NGOs have responded to HRBA by expanding their strategic toolset to add court-based or campaign-style advocacy efforts,[27] but this expansion only further complicates evaluating the effectiveness of HRBA as a development strategy. While proponents

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26. Ibid., 41.
27. Plipat, *Developmentizing Human Rights*.

of HRBA argue that it elevates advocacy to a development strategy, skeptics question if a rights discourse is able to challenge unequal power relations underlying poverty.[28] While HRBA may be expanding the advocacy activities of development NGOs, many scholars outside of the development field have pointed for some time at the limits of individual human rights as a sole basis for mobilization in the name of political and social change.[29]

HRBA is compatible with a wide range of strategic choices, many of which have been used by development NGOs for decades. This includes awareness-raising, participation, training, advocacy, mobilization, and the formation of alliances and partnerships. Central to HRBA is the relationship of individuals as rights holders and the state as primary duty bearer. This focus on the state creates a number of trade-offs depending on the choice of strategies. For example, NGOs may shift resources to mobilizing marginalized groups, choose to increase their involvement in national-level policymaking processes, or expand their partnership- and alliance-building efforts within the civil society sector. While it is possible to engage in all of the above, most NGOs' limited resources and organizational culture leads to a distinct emphasis in adopting certain strategies over others.[30]

Within the context of the dominant community- and state-level strategies, Plan primarily relies on a mix of capacity building and participation in its interactions with communities. Instead of direct service delivery, Plan focuses on strengthening the organizational capacity of community-based organizations (CBO) with the aim of improving quality of services delivered in areas such as health and education. For example, community members are trained as volunteers or community groups are formed to provide feedback on the quality of services usually provided by government staff. Participation continues to be most frequently encouraged in the implementation stages of program activities, while awareness-raising about human rights and issues of exclusion are less frequently used. Apart from some use of rights education in empowering children and citizens, appeals to self-interest as well as peer pressure ("naming and shaming") are also important strategies applied to encourage practices that positively affect health and education levels among children. The use of participation as a central strategy within CCCD points towards the hybrid nature of Plan's current efforts. Participation is a long-standing part of the toolset used by external actors and it only becomes part of HRBA when it involves transferring significant control over program design and implementation to communities.

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28. Sarah Bradshaw, "Is the Rights Focus the Right Focus? Nicaraguan Responses to the Rights Agenda," *Third World Quarterly* 27 (2006): 1329–41.

29. Emily B. Rodio and Hans Peter Schmitz, "Beyond Norms and Interests: Understanding the Evolution of Transnational Human Rights Activism," *International Journal of Human Rights* 14 (2010): 442–59.

30. Plipat, *Developmentizing Human Rights*.

At the state level, Plan International also primarily engages in capacity-building, mainly focused on technical and resource assistance as well as training of front-line staff. For example, Plan Guatemala decided to develop a close relationship with the Ministry of Health by providing training and financial support in order to ensure the provision of basic health services to more than 300 rural communities.[31] But there is little evidence of rights claims playing an important role in ensuring provision of these services and such lack of contention may indicate that the root causes of inequality were not addressed with this approach. Alignment with already existing programs and policies plays a much more important role than advocacy for policy change. In some cases, Plan has effectively used evidence-based advocacy to scale-up interventions previously tested with success at the community level. Some Plan country offices have also submitted their own reports when governments were asked to comply with the reporting requirements under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). But with a unique combination of collaborative state- and community-level strategies, Plan largely forgoes explicit cross-level strategies that rely on direct community mobilization, strengthening of civil society, expansion of civic spaces, coalition-building, and more overt political pressure on governments.

By putting the state into the role as primary duty bearer, HRBA puts in focus a new tension between community-led and state-led development strategies. While development NGOs previously substituted for both with their charity, more recent program evaluations of HRBA-driven efforts now provide evidence supporting both approaches. Plan has spent significant efforts in making both approaches compatible, for example by bringing government health workers out of the clinics and into the communities or by integrating community volunteers into a government program.

Effects on Outcomes and Impact: What Difference Does HRBA Make?

The ultimate test for HRBA is the results it creates in enhancing the enjoyment of political, civil, economic, and social rights. With the adoption of rights language, development NGOs have sharply increased their ambitions by shifting emphasis from mere outputs to outcomes and impact as well as by claiming to address "root causes" of poverty, including deeply ingrained forms of societal discrimination.[32] This certainly means that a single organization can no longer

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31. Bruno-van Vijfeijken, Gneiting, Schmitz, and Valle, *Learning from Guatemala*.

32. Tosca Bruno-van Vijfeijken and Hans Peter Schmitz, "A Gap between Ambition and Effectiveness," *Journal of Civil Society* 7 (2011): 287–92.

hope to realize these goals without entering into broader coalitions with other like-minded individuals and groups. Moreover, less tangible and more difficult to measure outcome categories, including the ability of rights holders to hold the government accountable and other more process-oriented results, are beginning to supplement or replace more traditional objectives such as building infrastructure or strengthening technical capacity.[33]

Plan International has identified six dimensions of change, including awareness/capacity, participation, practice, accountability, legislation/policy, and fulfillment of rights.[34] Similar categories can be found in the HRBA-inspired program documents of other development NGOs. Some categories, including accountability may be understood as a step (outcomes) towards an end of expanding rights (impact), but in practical application, all may be understood as means or ends. For example, changing legislation in a nation with high state capacity is more likely to produce immediate positive impact than in the context of a weak state. Similarly, increased participation is an end in itself, but may also be instrumental to enhancing accountability.

For the purpose of this essay, the six categories are condensed into the three outcomes of effectiveness, sustainability, and equity. Effectiveness is further divided into the dimensions of behavior change and access and quality of services. In doing so, it is possible to answer the key questions about HRBA, including if and how it makes a real difference and if those results are sustainable and meet basic requirements of equity and non-discrimination. This mix offers a set of demands which balances the need to pursue short-term goals of service delivery with assessing progress on more complex mid- and long-term goals aimed at addressing the root causes of poverty.

Behavior Change

Behavior change is a key goal pursued by Plan in its programming. Much of this activity is concentrated at the community level and aims at improving program effectiveness through encouraging individual participation and compliance as well as increasing demand for government services. Behavior change can mean a focus on the adoption of certain health practices at home, but can also take on a much more political meaning, for example when it entails mobilizing individuals to collectively enforce accountability of government staff and institutions. While it is difficult to assess any mid- or long-term effects of strategies aimed at behavior change,

33. Jude Rand and Gabrielle Watson, *Rights-Based Approaches: Learning Project* (Boston/Atlanta: Oxfam America/CARE USA, 2007).
34. Plan International, *Global Effectiveness Framework.*

evidence does support the idea that interactions with communities modified by a rights-based framework positively affect outcomes.

At a most basic level, human rights education is used to both empower individuals and end abuse and discriminatory behavior. There is evidence that Plan offices in Latin America are more likely to use such empowerment strategies than those based in Africa or Asia. Resulting improvements in self-esteem and awareness have contributed to reduction in violence against children and more acceptance of child education as a worthwhile goal among parents. In other areas, such as health or sanitation, improvements in outcomes were accomplished through more traditional sharing of "best practices" and showing how certain households are healthier because of adopting certain behaviors. Volunteers trained by Plan may go as far as using social pressure and "naming and shaming" to change the behavior of recalcitrant individuals or families.

In most cases, the extent of participation and community-wide engagement were positively correlated with program success. But evaluations often lacked the details necessary to determine if participation was limited to implementation, or involved a more extensive recognition of rights holders and their role in program design and planning. What is apparent here is that rights are becoming increasingly important, but significant swaths of program activities still do without them and may still accomplish goals.

The most frequently mentioned challenges to accomplishing behavior change at the individual and community level include countervailing cultural norms and difficulties associated with high turnover among volunteers and elite capture of CBOs. Activities related to sexual and reproductive rights or girls' education often face greater challenges and cannot be effectively addressed with one-time training programs or rights-based awareness-raising. Here, Plan's community-based strategy neglects opportunities to work with progressive civil society groups and may emphasize compliance over emancipatory dimensions of behavior change.

Access and Quality of Services

Most existing evaluations of HRBA focus attention on the ability of rights holders to make claims, not necessarily the actual changes in the enjoyment of rights. HRBA shifts attention away from direct service provision and takes a much more indirect path by focusing first on intangible resources and a transformation of consciousness and agency. This establishes a much more complex causal chain, leading from certain inputs (e.g., training, awareness-raising) to outputs (e.g., formation of community groups), outcomes (e.g., behavior change, collective action, state responsiveness), and the desired impact of greater enjoyment of rights. Most existing HRBA evaluations highlight success in the intermediate steps, including greater voice of the marginalized and more state accountability. These

general observations are also confirmed by the review of Plan International's version of HRBA in its CCCD approach.

Plan's goal is to ensure children's access to goods and services. The community focus creates two primary benefits: First, by encouraging the formation of community-based organizations (CBOs) and wider community participation, Plan can effectively supplement limited government services and improve access locally. Second, Plan's long-term local presence provides the organization with credibility when targeting government agencies with evidence-based advocacy aimed at scaling up proven practices.[35] But Plan's approach reflects only a tentative shift away from traditional service delivery and is best characterized as a hybrid of previous and new practices.

Plan's primary focus on the community level, combined with the recognition of the duty bearer role of governments, allows the organization to implement multi-level HRBA in the name of improving and extending the delivery of goods and services. In the case of Plan Guatemala, this strategy involved channeling financial resources through the Ministry of Health in order to provide services to rural communities. Plan's approach indicates that it views the lack of government services primarily as a capacity issue, not one of political will. On the one hand, HRBA is visible here in the explicit recognition of the government as a duty bearer, while, on other hand, it is not rights claims from below that lead to improved services, but Plan's external resources.

The creation of issue-specific CBOs plays a central role in improving services, including councils to monitor teachers and manage schools, organized health volunteers, or water management committees. Such CBOs are engaged in planning, fundraising, implementation, and monitoring at the local levels, but they may also serve as important vehicles for engaging local authorities at the district or municipal levels. In Bolivia and Pakistan, for example, Plan's efforts to organize communities increased feedback of local communities on health and education issues and in other cases, community volunteers become integrated into state agencies and their delivery of services.[36]

But beyond the evidence of greater voice and accountability, rarely do evaluations attempt to determine if greater interactions between citizens and authorities actually result in better quality of services. The exceptions point to political pressure and increased awareness among decision makers as a key variable. This confirms earlier conclusions that Plan should engage more systematically with local civil society organizations to strengthen the bridge between individuals and communities on the one hand, and the state on the other hand.

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35. Bruno-van Vijfeijken, Gneiting, and Schmitz, *Meta Review*, 23.
36. Ibid., 26.

Inclusion/Equity

A key goal of HRBA is non-discrimination and equality. Previous development efforts often neglected the most marginalized populations, either because they never were recognized as such by external actors or because helping them was not as efficient as helping the better-off.[37] A rights focus usually corrects these problems because of the high correlation between a specific social, ethnic, or other status and the relative absence of rights.

In the case of Plan International, the incomplete process of the shift towards a rights-based strategy is particularly visible in this category. The evaluations indicate that equity concerns are now regularly included in required situational analyses, but then often disappear into the background during the implementation of programs.[38] As a result, there is even less evidence of the effects of HRBA on equity compared to the other self-defined goals, behavior change and improved services. The most important limitation here was the absence of a specific breakdown of changes in behavior or service delivery by gender or other social categories.

Plan's main concern in program activities targeting equity issues focuses obviously on children and is then followed by an emphasis on female community members of all ages. In some cases, Plan had more success in reaching equity goals at the community level when it was able to shape the formation of community groups in ways that ensure significant female participation, rather than working with existing, often male-dominated groups. But it is unclear from the evaluations whether more gender-balanced groups perform better in their tasks. Other groups subject to discrimination, including migrants, children with special needs, or the poorest members of a community, are rarely specifically targeted.

At the national level, Plan has been effective through direct lobbying based on (1) evidence of effective interventions and good relations with government officials, (2) the participation in broader NGO alliances promoting specific causes such as education, and (3) the mobilization and organization of adolescents and children at the national level. The evaluations contained both examples of success of such campaigns, mostly in less controversial contexts (e.g., education in Ecuador) and examples of failure when more culturally sensitive issues were at stake (e.g., sexual and reproductive rights in Sri Lanka). Without a more proactive development of contentious advocacy strategies within Plan International, the organization's current version of HRBA will likely remain less effective in addressing more difficult issues of exclusion and inequity.

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37. Anthony Bebbington, "Donor-NGO Relations and Representations of Livelihood in Nongovernmental Aid Chains," *World Development* 33 (2005): 937–50.

38. Bruno-van Vijfeijken, Gneiting, and Schmitz, *Meta Review,* 40.

Sustainability

While HRBA projects are not necessarily superior in ensuring the short-term delivery of goods and services, they add an explicit concern for sustainability by focusing on underlying causes of poverty and aiming to institutionalize capacities "vital to ensuring that positive change is embedded and sustained."[39] Proponents of HRBA also hope that the focus on intangible skills and the creation of agency not only positively affects a specific project, but will be transferred to other issues and areas. Evaluating sustainability is particularly challenging in the context of programs that have been applied only very recently as well as in an uneven fashion, with many previous practices and expectations still shaping the interactions with communities.

Plan International defines sustainable program outcomes as those that thrive beyond Plan's own engagement and are resilient to changes in the local environment. This applies to any goals discussed earlier, including behavior change, improved services, and equity/inclusion. Strong community participation is positively correlated, not only with short-term program outcomes, but also long-term sustainability. Such community ownership is further strengthened if beneficiaries are involved in the earliest stages of planning. Since Plan does not pay volunteers, the involvement of community members throughout a project is important to its sustainability. Examples include, among others, evidence of community participation positively affecting the maintenance of water supply systems in East Timor. But apart from some positive cases, the evaluations also contain many failed attempts to ensure sustainability and usually highlight either a lack of resources or high turnover among volunteer groups as causes. Both of these explanations raise more questions (and need for research) than they answer.

Neither lack of resources, nor high turnover likely represents the root cause driving sustainability challenges. The former is presumably a general condition across all communities in which Plan works, and the latter is certainly a result of deeper issues causing volatility in community involvement. Moreover, many evaluations point to very similar problems at the government level, identifying the lack of resources and capacity as well as high turnover among frontline staff and decision makers as causes for limited state capacity and an inability to take over services.[40]

Plan International would likely benefit from addressing some of these challenges through a more systematic use of now neglected strategies aimed at the civil society and state levels. While Plan has yet to develop a consistent "exit strategy" across programs, such an expanded strategy should involve a more dedicated effort to

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39. Crawford, *Bangladesh*.
40. Bruno-van Vijfeijken, Gneiting, and Schmitz, *Meta Review*, 32.

build the capacity of local civil society partners as well as a more sophisticated analysis of cases where government agencies fail to deliver basic services in education, health, or other areas.

Conclusions

Rights-based approaches have proliferated across development INGOs and represent today a wide consensus among practitioners, although labels and practices vary greatly across (and even within) organizations. Different NGOs have for now developed their own "brand" of HRBA, shaped by pre-existing understandings of the core development challenges and the unique organizational context of each agency. This diversity of approaches makes any general claims about the effectiveness of HRBA difficult and suggests that it is more promising for researchers to identify and assess the effectiveness of specific strategies within the HRBA framework.

Plan International provides a compelling case for evaluating initial steps towards HRBA because of its unique combination of community- and evidence-based advocacy strategies. Evidence of improved access and quality of services as well as more meaningful community involvement at the local levels support the shift, but questions about the equity and sustainability of these changes remain. The systematic targeting of the national level through evidence-based advocacy represents a major step in scaling up successful community programs, but it remains ineffective when political or cultural resistance is high.

The evaluations reveal that several additional steps towards strengthening HRBA are needed. First, more systematic evaluations of HRBA program activities are required and should become part of expanded training of staff as well as guidelines on how to apply the framework in specific contexts. While HRBA should not be reduced into another "manual"-driven development activity, studies of existing experiences should be exploited for training and other purposes. Second, expectations for staff performance should shift attention away from the traditional focus on outreach, outputs, and service delivery to include a concern for more mid- and long-term effects, in particular a greater enjoyment of a broad set of rights in addition to reduced poverty and advances in development. This presents a particularly vexing challenge today because many donors increasingly demand evidence for measurable (short-term) effects that may not be easily forthcoming when applying a long-term rights-based strategy. It is imperative to educate both individual and institutional donors that successful development efforts require a significant shift of control to the local level and a complex analysis of the effects of program activities. Donors asking for more "meaningful" evaluations should focus on how the wishes of rights holders are reflected in the activities and how to strike a "balance between outcomes and processes."[41]

Successful HRBA programming should be driven by local demands and lead to a progressively diminished role of external actors.

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41. Gready, "Reasons to Be Cautious."