Towards a Theory of Change:
Human Rights and Development in the New Millennium

COST ACTION IS 0702: The Role of the EU in UN Human Rights Reform

Working Group II on Human Rights and Development Tools

AHRI members of COST Action IS 0702 on the role of the EU in UN Human Rights reform have established since 2009 a specific Working Group II of researchers focused on the sub-topic of human rights and development tools, including a particular focus on EU and UN institutions.

The major output of this work is an edited volume: *Towards a Theory of Change: Human Rights and Development in the New Millennium* (Routledge, 2013).

In addition to this, the team has prepared *a series of policy briefs* to help translate the research findings into concrete recommendations for European, UN and other development policy makers.

The added-value of this research is that it employs a *theory of change framework* in the analysis of how human rights inform development work at local, national and international levels. The contributions ask how the expansion of human rights into development work affects *organisational and operational change* and investigates the role of different actors in bringing about change.

The Working Group believes this research can inform key EU and UN policy instruments such as the Agenda for Change and the UN Development Group's Human Rights Mainstreaming Mechanism.

What Change Are We Trying To Achieve?
Theories of Change in Human Rights and Development

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Few human rights or development agencies work with an explicit theory of change. It is much more common for agencies to have an implicit, partially formed theory of change. The objective of this research project is to explore what might be gained by bringing these implicit, partially formed theories of change to light. It addresses two core questions: What is gained by making theories of change explicit rather than implicit? And, what are the similarities and differences between human rights and development theories of change, and why is such an analysis useful? The potential advantage of rendering a theory of change explicit is that it provides a vantage point from which all aspects of organisational activity can be viewed, coordinated and, if necessary, reformed.

A theory of change links a goal or concept ('the theory') and the mechanisms or methodologies that are designed to deliver on the promise of the goal or concept ('the change'). It encapsulates 'our perceptions, assumptions or beliefs about the process or pathway through which social change can or will' be achieved.   Outward looking theories seek to understand the way in which change occurs through policies, programmes, projects, campaigns and other operational activities. Inward looking theories of change refer to the internal dynamics and priorities of organisations, and how they change over time and in relation to shifts in operational focus, external pressures, and so on.

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COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology) is one of the longest-running European instruments supporting cooperation among scientists and researchers across Europe, and is mainly supported by the European Union's 7th Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development. (http://www.cost.eu)

AHRI (Association of Human Rights Institutes) consists of 41 member institutions based in Europe that carry out research and education in the field of human rights. (http://www.ahri-network.org)

http://www.cost.eu/domains_actions/isch/Actions/IS0702

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The project compares human rights and development theories of change for a number of reasons. Theories of change in development are more advanced, originating in the literature on monitoring and evaluation. In human rights, theories of change are virtually non-existent. Will human rights feel the need to articulate theories of change? If so, will organisations simply borrow from neighbours such as development organisations or generate their own theories of change? Whatever transferable lessons there may be one would also expect differences between the two fields to be reflected in their theories of change, despite recent convergence brought about by more serious work on economic and social rights, human rights-based approaches to development, and related developments. Development work is essentially evidence based, for example, whereas human rights activism is more usually governed by laws and norms (as such human rights theories of change often start form laws and work backwards). Development actors often work in partnership with governments, and in some cases will work with governments which human rights agencies regard as oppressive. Such differences will surely inform theories of change.

Human rights organisations work with a number of almost always implicit theories of change. Examples include: 1) human rights as a 'visibility project' (Gearty) which operates through naming and shaming for perpetrators and through amplification of voice for victims; 2) the literature on transnational advocacy networks and norm socialisation in domestic settings; 3) an actor-oriented perspective on human rights; and 4) an emphasis on the need to combine multiple methods.

As theories of change, or elements of a theory of change, these four approaches are not mutually exclusive – local struggles against oppression can resonate though transnational networks, for example – and indeed may be more powerful in combination, but neither can they all be embraced without contradiction. Some are focused and narrowly construed, others are more ambitious and wide-ranging. For practitioners, different theories require different skill sets. Certain approaches emphasise law while alternatives prioritise local struggles as the 'legitimizing anchor' (Simmons). Top-down and bottom-up approaches, alongside outcome and process orientations, can be mutually reinforcing but can also exist in tension, as for example when local struggles generate demands for rights that are not recognised in existing international standards. The theories raise questions about which actors human rights organisations should work with in coalitions or networks, and how they should work to bridge the divide between international and national law, and human rights rhetoric and reality. Human rights is now used by actors as diverse as the World Bank, corporations and social movements, as well as the usual NGO suspects, and as such it is a babel of competing voices and agendas. There is no single understanding of human rights and therefore no single theory of change – organisations signing up to human rights will have to make choices.

Development organisations also work with a number of often implicit outward looking theories of change, albeit that the literature on theories of change is more sophisticated in this sector. Four theories of change dominate, which broadly map onto the human rights theories explored above: target group identities and characteristics (specifically, vulnerability and resilience); the nature of relationships and partnerships; participation; and multiple methods.

As with human rights these four approaches are not mutually exclusive – participation is often dependant on local partnerships, for example – and indeed may be more powerful in combination, but neither can they all be embraced without contradiction. Similarly, the level of ambition varies across approaches as does the skill set required to deliver the interventions. Like their human rights counterparts, development agencies also have to make choices when it comes to theories of change.

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Theories relating to **organisational change** (inward looking theories of change) can be applied to both human rights and development organisations. Relevant theories include: 1) organisational change due to changes in the external environment; 2) organisational change as a result of structured cycles of internal reflection and planning; 3) organisational change due to the adoption of new issues and approaches; and 4) organisational change driven by new leadership, or as leaders adopt new priorities.

Policy implications:

Organisations should consider adopting an explicit theory of change, as such a theory encourages agencies to think about issues such as causation, influence and actors, and to link theory, and broader strategic thinking and planning, to practice.

It remains true that development work is more evidence based, preventive, pragmatic, non-confrontational, while human rights work is still largely driven by norms, reactive, principled and adversarial. Implicit in each of these binaries is an assumption about how change is best achieved.

Implicit theories of change in human rights and development focus on broadly similar challenges: relevant stakeholder identities and characteristics (should stakeholders be seen as victims or as vulnerable/resilient?); the advantages and disadvantages of using multiple methods; important relationships and actors; balancing the local and global, and process and outcomes; and engaging with the state in the manner most likely to bring about change (partnership versus advocacy and critique).

Convergence through, for example, human rights-based approaches to development sheds further light on these similarities and differences e.g. rights principles such as participation and non-discrimination are used in development with often little or no reference to international human rights law, and with an emphasis on the shift from needs to entitlements, a distilled essence of rights (principles), and building the capacities of duty bearers (the state) as well as rights holders. In short, the encounter between human rights and development produces something new, that is neither conventional human rights nor conventional development and that suggests new theories of change.

The comparison is useful because it highlights very different visions of the world and how to bring about change. It also suggests ways in which one field can learn from another, and raises questions about whether greater consensus about theories of change is desirable or not. Are sectors stronger when there is convergence on such issues or when diversity and disagreement prevails?

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