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Human Rights and Development Practice

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In the past two decades, there has been a growing engagement between development and human rights practitioners and thinkers. But are participants in this dialogue still mainly talking past each other? Or has there been valuable cross-fertilization and learning—the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) themselves being a fruit of this convergence? This note addresses three points. The first point is the growing convergence between human rights and development thinking along several dimensions, particularly on social and economic rights. The second point is a consideration of the continuing areas of difference or divergence and of outstanding or open questions. Are these areas of conflict or are they valuable complementarities? The third point asks where are we with MDGs on the ground, and what can the dialogue between human rights and development contribute to furthering progress on MDGs?

It is useful to start with a fairly basic definition (adapted from the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* of human rights as international norms that help protect all people everywhere from severe political, legal, economic, and social abuses; or, alternatively, that serve to secure and preserve extremely important goods, protections, and freedoms in those various areas for all people everywhere (Nickel 2011). These rights are now embodied in the 1947 Universal Declaration on Human Rights and in nine core international covenants and treaties.

Convergence

Arguably, there are now several *areas of convergence* between human rights and development. The first area is how the wide scope of the human rights agenda has been paralleled by a great broadening of development concerns over several decades. It is instructive to quote the World Bank Articles of Agreement on the purposes of the institution. The purposes enumerated there include the following:

...encouragement of the development of productive facilities and resources in less developed countries... To promote private foreign investment... [and]... To promote the long-range balanced growth of international trade and the maintenance of equilibrium in balances of payments... (article 1)

It is notable how the interpretation of these terms has broadened over the decades to the point where the Bank's primary purpose is now viewed as poverty alleviation, seen as a multidimensional concept that encompasses human development, social development, environment, governance, and institutions.

At the same time, the emphasis of human rights thinking on the rights of *every* individual has been matched by a shift in development attention from a predominant interest in aggregate measures of welfare (such as GDP or average per capita income), to increasingly fine-grained consideration of outcomes for specific subgroups and households, to thinking about "winners and losers." As a result, we see the emergence

of greater concern with issues of inequality and distribution, gender disparities, geographic disparities, outcomes for marginal groups, and so on.

A final dimension of this convergence is the growing emphasis in development practice at the level of operations and process on *participation, consultation, and accountability*.

Some aspects of these changes are obvious. For example, the proportion of development lending going to human development, governance, social development, gender, and environment issues is rising, relative to more traditional economic management, finance, private sector development, and trade activities. At the World Bank, this proportion has increased from a little over 40 percent in the early 1990s to approximately 50 percent today. Even more striking is the mini-revolution in knowledge about many areas closely linked to the human rights agenda and the growing tempo of operational work in these areas (such as that on poverty or governance).

It is remarkable how much more we know about *poverty and income inequality* than we knew 20 years ago because of the simple accumulation and documentation of data from surveys of households, living standards measurements, demographics, health, employment, and the like. This influx of information, in turn, has stimulated much new research on poverty and inequality, together with many new tools, models, and instruments (such as the World Bank's poverty assessments and poverty and social impact analysis). One example of new analytical and empirical work is the development of a new index of equality of opportunity. The index takes into account both the overall opportunity available in a country or region and the inequalities in access to that opportunity based on factors such as parental income and education, ethnicity, gender, and birthplace (Paes de Barros et al. 2009).

Another example is work on *governance*. In addition to well-known broad governance indicators based on perceptions surveys, there are now more precisely focused *actionable governance indicators* that aim to throw light on how specific governance systems are designed and implemented. These new indicators draw, in part, on new survey instruments, such as public expenditure tracking surveys and quantitative service delivery surveys. The kind of information those instruments gather should be particularly useful for human rights-based approaches, with their focus on the distinction between *rightsholders* and *duty bearers* and their stress on the performance of duty bearers.

Those are only some of the many examples of how development thinking and practice have evolved in ways that are considerably enriching our knowledge and operational experience on issues of key concern for both development and human rights.

Open Questions

What about *areas of continued or potential divergence* between human rights and development thinkers and practitioners? A frequent criticism of development practitioners is that they rarely, if ever, give sufficient prominence to human rights as ends in themselves. When such rights are considered, it is only instrumentally as means to some other end—for example, economic growth. There is clearly some truth to this criticism. Development practitioners need to reflect more deeply on Amartya Sen's approach of "development as freedom," of expanding human capabilities as an end rather than a means to something else. To make progress on these issues, the World Bank is undertaking a more systematic initiative, supported by a trust fund (from the five Nordic countries) to develop greater conceptual clarity about the links between human rights and core Bank activities and to explore how human rights considerations can improve the effectiveness of Bank activities, in line with the priorities of developing-country partners (<http://www.worldbank.org/ordictrustfund>).

What about criticisms of the human rights approach from the perspective of development practitioners? Many of these criticisms were reviewed some years ago by Mary Robinson, the former United Nations high commissioner for human rights, in a book chapter titled "What Rights Can Add to Good Development Practice" (Robinson 2005). Robinson observes that human rights bodies have often had to adjust their approaches when grappling with the same real-world issues that confront development agencies. For example, if human rights agencies want to do practical work with national governments, they inevitably must take into account the political perspectives of those governments, much as development agencies do.

Also relevant is the criticism that human rights practitioners have difficulty coping with the resource constraints facing poor countries and the need for trade-offs—that is, getting more of one thing typically entails less of something else. In practice, the force of this criticism is somewhat reduced by increasing acceptance of the idea of the *progressive realization* of rights. Nevertheless, as Robinson observes, human rights advocates do have difficulties with trade-offs because the human rights framework is a systemic one, underpinned by notions of universality and indivisibility; and because "unlike development, human rights is not a pragmatic tradition" (p. 34). Perhaps this is a case where one should recognize and value the complementarity of the human rights and development traditions. For example, it is valuable for development practitioners to be forcefully challenged not to make trade-offs at the expense of the weakest and most vulnerable in society, just as human rights advo-

cates need to take account of the apparently unrelated costs and side effects of rigid insistence on some favored program.¹

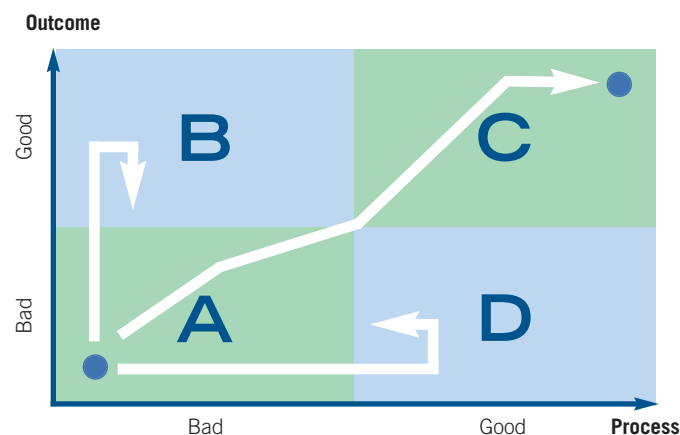
But one can also ask the following questions: Although the engagement with human rights has helped broaden the development agenda and adopt a more fine-grained focus on inequity and discrimination, how much does it really help provide better, concrete answers to the hard questions facing development practitioners about what actually works in “doing development”? And in what concrete ways does a human rights–based approach to development help advance the human rights agenda itself?

Figure 1 is adapted from an interesting presentation on human rights–based approaches to development proposed by human rights agencies (Jonsson 2009). Here the vertical outcome axis represents various internationally accepted human rights standards, such as eradication of hunger and malnutrition and provision of universal primary education. On the horizontal process axis are human rights principles and processes, such as equality and nondiscrimination, participation and inclusion, accountability, and rule of law. The figure suggests that attempts to improve outcomes without also strengthening processes are unsustainable and therefore doomed. But so also will be mere improvements in processes that do not result in better outcomes. The line from quadrant A to quadrant C suggests an optimal relationship or path between the two that enables a country to strengthen both outcomes and processes in a mutually reinforcing way.

That is a useful conceptual framework. Development practitioners have become more appreciative of the value of accountability and other governance reforms in development (and of causality in the opposite direction, from better living standards and human capabilities to demands for more voice and accountability). By itself, however, this remains something of an underdetermined framework. Even with good accountability and institutions, many questions remain unanswered. How indeed do we ensure adequate housing for all people? Are tough rent controls and more public investment in housing the way to go? Or will a more free market approach yield better results? What exactly are the health interventions that will reduce maternal mortality, and where will we find the resources to pay for them? Should we cut spending on something else, raise taxes, borrow, or just print a bit more money?

It would also be wrong to suggest that development practitioners have all the answers to these tough questions. We often think we do, and can usually put forward powerful causal models of these links. But it often turns out that these models are quite far from reality; and that, in some cases, we have merely let ourselves get carried away by ideological

Figure 1. A Human Rights–Based Approach to Development



Source: Jonsson 2009.

fashion rather than evidence. Indeed, if there is one theme in development thinking over the past decade, it is the demand for more rigor and attention to evidence.

Rather than grand frameworks, the emphasis now is more pragmatic and focused on impact evaluation—that is, on the careful assessment of how far changes in the well-being of specific individuals, households, or communities can be causally attributed to a particular project, program, or policy. We are still far from able to apply this approach as extensively as we would like, but it is the desired direction. And perhaps it would be fruitful in future collaboration between development and human rights practitioners to think about more evidence–based approaches, to work on improving data and indicators, and to find what does and does not work in human rights and development.

MDGs: Progress on the Ground and the Outlook

Turning to the MDGs, robust growth in developing countries has been conducive to significant gains in pursuit of the income poverty goal. Since 1990, the global poverty headcount rate at the \$1.25-a-day level fell 40.0 percent, reaching 25.2 percent by 2005. Although the global crisis has slowed its progress, it will not prevent the developing world from meeting and exceeding the global target of halving income poverty by 2015. As table 1 indicates, the poverty rate for the developing world as a whole is expected to fall to 15 percent by 2015, well below the target of 21 percent. All individual regions are also on track, with the exception of Sub-Saharan Africa. But even there, poverty was falling fairly rapidly in the 2000s, dipping from approximately 58 percent in 1999 to 51 percent in 2005. Nevertheless, the impact of the crisis on poverty has been far from negligible. An additional

Table 1. Outlook for Poverty in Developing Countries

| Global-level scenario | 1990 | 2005 | 2015 | 2020 |
|--|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Percentage of the population living on less than \$1.25 a day | | | | |
| Postcrisis | 41.7 | 26.2 | 15.0 | 12.8 |
| Precrisis | 41.7 | 25.2 | 14.1 | 11.7 |
| Low-growth | 41.7 | 25.2 | 18.5 | 16.3 |
| Number of people living on less than \$1.25 a day (millions) | | | | |
| Postcrisis | 1,817 | 1,371 | 918 | 826 |
| Precrisis | 1,817 | 1,371 | 865 | 755 |
| Low-growth | 1,817 | 1,371 | 1,132 | 1,053 |

Source: World Bank staff calculations.

estimated 64 million people will be living in poverty (at the \$1.25-a-day level) in 2010 as a result of the crisis; and even in 2015, the number of people in poverty as a result of the crisis is projected to be 53 million (World Bank 2010).

There has also been progress toward the hunger and malnutrition goals, but the food price shock preceding the global financial crisis led to a notable setback. The proportion of people who suffer from hunger had fallen from 20 percent in 1990 to 16 percent by 2005, but the 2009 estimate anticipated a jump to 19 percent. Although food prices fell sharply in 2009, they remain volatile; several rose sharply again in 2010 and early 2011, nearly reaching 2008 levels.

Progress on the other MDGs has been uneven. On the positive side, two thirds of developing countries had reached gender parity in primary education by 2005; and the target of gender parity in primary and secondary education by 2015 looks likely to be met, although countries were falling behind on gender parity in tertiary education and in empowerment of women. There was also relatively good progress on primary school completion, although the world is likely to fall short of the target, largely because of underperformance in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. Efforts to expand access to safe drinking water are also on track globally and in most regions. Improving access to sanitation has proved more difficult, however. Although sanitation coverage is rising, the global target will be missed. The health goals appear most challenging, especially for child and maternal mortality rates. Most regions were off track in the middle to late 2000s, although East Asia, Europe and Central Asia, and Latin America were doing better than other regions.

Looking forward, the immediate concern is with the short- and longer-term impacts of the crisis on the outlook for the MDGs. Statistical analysis suggests that the adverse impact on MDGs during downturns tends to be larger than

the benefit during upturns. Vulnerable groups such as infants and children—especially, girls—are disproportionately affected. Child mortality, primary school completion rates (particularly for girls), and gender parity in education tend to suffer. Growth in advanced countries is also likely to be subdued for a significant period, with adverse impacts on developing-country trade and growth. And, although aid reached a record high in real absolute terms in 2008, and although donors have pledged significant increases in aid, the severe fiscal pressures now facing rich countries may lead to underperformance in practice.

Given this undoubtedly gloomier global environment, a key question is this: to what extent will developing countries be able to return to the robust growth path of the 2000s? No doubt the boom conditions in the global economy at that time played a part in that robust growth. But it is also true that macroeconomic conditions and policies in developing countries were generally more stable, prudent, and conducive to growth than in previous decades, with relatively low levels of external debt (partly because of debt relief initiatives), modest budget deficits, restrained inflation, more openness to absorption of foreign knowledge, and so on.

If developing countries are able to sustain this kind of a positive *enabling environment*, then most development analysts would expect them to be able to secure relatively good rates of growth going forward—if not at the boom pace of the 2000s. One of the underlying reasons relates to the so-called advantages of backwardness—the fact that most developing countries are still far below the level of technology available in advanced countries. Given a good enabling environment, most developing economies would be able to raise productivity fairly rapidly by absorbing existing knowledge from abroad, rather than inventing it for themselves. The rapid growth of South-South trade and investment flows among developing countries would be another supportive factor.²

If this kind of scenario is correct and developing-country growth returns to a reasonably robust pace, it would provide increasing resources to support continued progressive realization of the MDGs and of the broader human rights agenda. We hasten to add that more growth would, by no means, guarantee these outcomes. Governments would need to pay close attention to ensure that the fruits of growth were equitably distributed.

Notes

1. As an example of such apparently unrelated costs and effects, consider a program in which increased spending on HIV antiretroviral drugs might have to be paid for by cancelling a road project that would raise poor people's incomes by linking remote villages to markets.

2. Canuto and Giugale (2010) make the case for a relatively robust postcrisis outlook in developing countries and for the kinds of policies needed to support it.

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