



Empowerment Note 1

Linkages between human rights-based approaches and empowerment

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This note lays out the conceptual and practical linkages between human-rights based approaches (HRBAs) and empowerment, focusing on key aspects such as the different types of power and the roles of agency and structure. These aspects are discussed more fully in the paper on 'Understanding and Operationalising Empowerment' (Luttrell and Quiroz, 2007).

The UN Common Understanding of a human rights-based approach is based on a number of principles, of which empowerment is an important one. A rights perspective provides a framework for examining and addressing the key aspects of power relations that influence people's capacities, rights and responsibilities. Just as empowerment of the rights-holder is an integral part of a human-rights based approach, a HRBA adds value by helping to transform imbalances in existing distributions of power.

However, despite these similarities, there are elements of the rights and empowerment approaches that remain analytically distinct (Alsop and Norton, 2005). The most obvious of these is the emphasis on the obligations of the duty-bearer. A HRBA has its foundation in the normative framework of international human rights standards and principles, and the protection and promotion of these. States, as primary duty-bearers, are obliged to respect, protect and fulfil the human rights entitlements of individuals, or rights-holders. This universally accepted set of standards presents operational distinctions from empowerment.

Both empowerment and rights approaches clearly lay an emphasis on people as agents of change rather than as beneficiaries (this is discussed more fully in Foresti and Ludi, 2007). A HRBA, however, focuses more strongly on relationships between public institutions (at various levels) and civil society, and how to make public institutions accountable to all citizens. This difference

manifests itself most clearly in a key debate surrounding empowerment over the relative roles of structure versus agency. A HRBA has helped with a shift away from a needs approach based on 'charity', to a recognition of the rights of poor people to entitlements and the obligations on the part of others that are enshrined in law. In many development agencies, there has been a move away from a generic empowerment approach to a human rights approach as the social and political constraints on the poor are increasingly recognised.

Many writers, such as Alsop (2005) and Carney (2002), bring out the strong conceptual affinities between rights and empowerment approaches in their emphasis on power and respect for individuals. These writers stress that successful poverty reduction depends on providing opportunities for poor people to contest their rights through normative changes, including through legal frameworks. Civil and political rights empower poor people not only to claim their economic and social rights but also to demand accountability for good public services, pro-poor public policies and a transparent participatory process open to hearing their views. There is therefore a tendency for a HRBA to focus more overtly on the transforming 'structures' for empowerment. Indeed, there are those writing on empowerment from an agency perspective (such as Rowlands, 1997 and Kabeer, 2001) who do not consider the political or legal aspects of empowerment, nor place much, if any, emphasis on rights-based approaches.

Fox (2005) suggests that there is a difference between empowerment (as capacities) and rights (as institutionally recognised opportunities): rights may be recognised institutionally, but power imbalances often mean that actors are not able to actually claim them. A focus on the empowerment aspects of a HRBA, however, helps to emphasise the importance of the ability to *exercise* rights rather than merely their

possession. Save the Children has faced concerns associated with the empowerment of children in contexts where there is no acceptance of children expressing their views. Projects aimed at taking children out of employment to go to school were halted following consultations with children themselves. Instead, Save the Children decided to stop advocating for the full eradication of child labour, and has tried instead to find ways of combining education opportunities with children's responsibilities towards their families, including through appropriate labour practices that do not undermine their development.

This example also reflects the debate over different types of power. In this case, the process of demanding increased rights or change cannot be expected to emerge spontaneously to easily challenge entrenched inequalities. Save the Children's initial focus on 'power to' and the structural aspects of discrimination (which a HRBA encourages) was therefore less effective in this example. A subsequent focus on building 'power within' attempts to change individuals' own perceptions about their rights, capacities and potential in order to tackle 'invisible' (or internalised) power (these different elements of power are discussed more fully in Empowerment Note 3).

The way in which development agencies relate 'empowerment' to a HRBA varies. In SDC, Norad and DFID, a human rights approach to empowerment is dominant. Indeed, SDC (2004) explicitly conceptualises empowerment as a process in which the disadvantaged are empowered to exercise their rights. NGOs such as Save the Children, CARE International and CONCERN also take a strong rights-based approach to policy and programming of empowerment. There are organisations that take a less 'political' approach and do not include a HRBA in their empowerment strategies. The World Bank has been active in the evolution of thinking around empowerment and has included principles such as empowerment and accountability within its new Social Development Strategy 2005 (Foresti et al., 2006). However, until recently, it has been constrained by its Articles of Agreement from working directly on human rights owing to the perception that these are 'political' issues. CIDA also does not mention rights in its discussions of empowerment, but its women's empowerment programmes are often implemented alongside women's rights programmes.

There are dilemmas associated with a HRBA. One of the main areas of potential conflict between a HRBA and empowerment is over the issue of collective rights and the way these might be in conflict with cultural values. In Latin America, the recognition of indigenous autonomies regulated by their own forms and notions of justice faces dilemmas in relation to the concept of the primacy of individual human rights over collective rights (Assies, 2002; Gouws, 2005).

In terms of practical implications, many NGOs have experienced significant changes in their relationships with partners accompanying the introduction of a HRBA. It can be a challenge to avoid disempowering partners while introducing a HRBA to previously service-delivery orientated organisations (see, for example, Luttrell and

Piron, 2005). A HRBA also forces engagement in politics and power relations and can increase tensions when partners are not themselves committed to a HRBA. A HRBA helps move from 'passive beneficiaries' to 'active citizens' and therefore implies greater attention to advocacy and capacity building. A HRBA therefore requires a different skills base, with more emphasis on analytical than technical skills, skills that may not be present in the existing partner organisation.

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