
PRAXIS Interviews Practitioners: Francis Battal

Is there a right to development?

Yes, a right to development does exist. It is a tool that can operationalize human rights treaties in development practice. It is an attempt to bring human rights down from their legal ivory tower to the grassroots level and put the human being back at the center of development practice. This means their full participation as both rights-bearers and claimants. Rights-bearers must also work in partnership with duty-bearers as partners with reciprocal obligations to realize rights.

Have human rights fit into your development work, and if so, how?

All through my work. I came to realize that human rights were a vital part of my job, a part that was seriously neglected by the agency I was working for. That said though, in my last few years with UNICEF we did begin to attempt handling human rights issues, especially the rights of children and women. But we proceeded with caution given the sensitivity involved. The question of sacrosanct territorial sovereignty was a major constraint. However, a soft diplomatic approach with backup from some diplomats who had strong bilateral relations with my country, Sudan, helped push our work ahead a little bit. UNICEF achieved a few key human rights goals, such as the retrieval of enslaved children, by using the incentive and disincentive approach, in contrast to the naming and shaming approach. The key to success in this situation was UNICEF's ability to mobilize some of the perpetrators to cooperate in the return of enslaved women and children at no cost except for the logistics.

Have you witnessed gross violations of human rights in your work? If so, how did you respond?

Yes. In a country like Sudan, human rights violations are a daily occurrence. In many situations I did not have the power or the mandate from my organization to intervene directly. I could only report incidences to my boss who would find ways to handle some situations or refer them to another organization. On some occasions I tried to intervene in my personal capacity as a concerned individual.

A native of Sudan, Francis Battal has worked for CONCERN, UNICEF and Save the Children on various aspects of emergency relief, particularly in the fields of peace education, health, and nutrition. He received Diplomas in health from the Health Training Institute and Gezira University in his native country. Currently, he is working towards a Master of Arts in Humanitarian Assistance at The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy.

Some development agencies have been reluctant to enter into human rights advocacy while doing development work due to security considerations. What is the responsibility of development workers who witness human rights violations?

I think any development agency that does not respond to human rights violations is guilty by complicity. My argument stems from the fact that silence can be seen as approval in many communities. If it is seen as approval the perpetrators of human rights violations may do more harm if they are aware that development agencies will not engage in human rights issues. My advice is that it is better not to operate in such an environment than to be complicit with violations. Another problem is that silence does not always guarantee the safety of development workers. There have been several situations where they ended up as the victims of human rights violations in spite of their silent, diplomatic approach to the issues.

What are the challenges to combining human rights and development work in a conflict situation?

I see development and human rights as integral and indivisible parts of human development. As Karen Kenny argued, the delivery of relief assistance and the protection of human rights are twin pillars of humanitarian action.¹ The same applies to the development enterprise, where attention to human rights is an essential requirement. The main challenges are issues of coordination between typical development-oriented agencies and classical human rights agencies like Amnesty International and Human Right Watch. These two types of agencies need to realize that their ultimate goal is the same. This is an attempt to make both human rights and development agencies realize that whether human rights such as the right to life or the right to a higher standard of health are violated due to a political, economic or social cause, the result is the same: a right has been violated. Granted, the means by which to realize and enjoy such human rights might be different if the ultimate goal is the right to life as opposed to the right to a better standard of health. Because of this, cooperation and coordination on human rights issues should become an integral part of all agency operations. Unfortunately, in the real world this seems to pose a greater challenge to humanitarian and development agencies as a result of the way they define their missions and mandates.

What is the greatest development challenge facing Sudan?

The greatest development challenge facing my country is the absence of peace, which I define as an absence of war along with a stable environment conducive for growth and

development. This does not mean an absence of low-level conflict, which I think could be a positive agent for development.

There seem to be some difficulties with transferring global best practices to local situations, as they do not always fit. How can regional development models be better utilized in development work?

I think the failure of some transfers is related to both the decision-making process and the choice of what is transferable. On many occasions, development practitioners try to replicate examples or successes from one situation to another on the assumption that it should work, without any consideration for the locale-specific context. This is in addition to a lack of consideration for—or on many occasions a suppression of—local initiatives. The worst situations are related to the intellectual arrogance of assuming that we know the best practice and therefore are capable of deciding what is good for the underdeveloped. I recommend exploration of local initiatives first. Thorough studies should precede decisions about whether an external import of ideas is needed.

What do you consider success in development—what are your goals in your work?

What I see as success in development is progression, be it in economic or in human development terms—meaning skills and knowledge acquisition or social capital building. The key is that this progression must have the ultimate goal of improving the well being of each human in terms of better access to good housing, health care, literacy, communication systems, market function, and respect for human rights. These are the goals of my work.

What skills do you need to succeed in the field of international development?

A general understanding of the social sciences including basic economics, conflict management, human rights, and diplomacy. In specific situations, technical consultants are needed for certain tasks.

What has been the most difficult experience you have had in your work?

The most difficult experience in my life was to be posted as a national officer by my organization in the middle of a war situation where no rule of law existed, only the power of the gun. I was expected to perform well with no clear mandate and very little support, either in terms of policy or materials. I was like a person thrown into the sea with tied hands and feet who is asked not to sink.

Notes

¹ Kenny, Karen, *When Needs Are Rights: an Overview of UN Efforts to Integrate Human Rights in Humanitarian Action*, Occasional Paper 38, Thomas J. Watson Jr. Institute for International Studies and the International Human Rights Trust (Providence: Brown University, 2000).