
The Antidote to Patronage, Power Politics, and Structural Poverty? Humanitarianism and Rights: Thoughts from a Practitioner

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Tying human rights to humanitarian aid gets to the heart of structural poverty: power politics. The powerful or politically advantaged hold and maintain a grip on resources (political, natural, or otherwise) to maintain their authority. Whether through ruthless exploitation, seemingly harmless cronyism, or patron-client relationships, these elites maintain power at the expense of citizens' rights. From the recent U.S. presidential elections held in the southern state of Florida, to the even more recent presidential elections in the southern African nation of Zimbabwe, not only are human rights universal but also universally ignored or trampled by those more powerful and affluent.

The late Tip O'Neil once astutely said, "All politics is local." Human rights abuses are no different, as they tend to be perpetrated by the powerful, local elite. In Sierra Leone, youth and women feel their rights have been abused by chiefs and political elites, who have, among other things, historically pilfered donor and non-governmental organization (NGO) contributions for personal profit, thus maintaining a cycle of structural poverty for intended recipients.¹ The cronyism of local leaders has fueled frustration among youth, who have increasingly flocked to the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF) or the pro-government Civil Defense Forces to vent their anger.² A weapon commands respect from everyone, especially village leaders.

Hugo Slim provides an account of how NGOs and donors have de-politicized poverty to focus on the apolitical "needs" of "victims."³ Through this de-politicization of poverty and conflict, issues of rights and justice have fallen by the wayside. By addressing only the immediate needs of the poor, superficial attempts are made at alleviating poverty. Eradicating poverty requires more than simply providing food, digging wells, donating seeds and farm tools, and offering technical assistance. Indeed, to tackle the root causes of poverty, issues of politics, justice, and rights must be addressed.

Needs-based approaches stand in stark contrast to rights-based approaches. A needs-based approach attempts to ease the suffering of those less fortunate and focuses strictly on their physiological needs. This approach tends to be hierarchical, top-down, and paternalistic. The rights-based approach recognizes that everyone is equal and tries to address the root causes of poverty. It also assumes that there is an underlying reason beyond financial contributions and technical assistance as to why people remain poor. As such, the rights-based approach is better equipped to address the problems of recurrent

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structural poverty and conflict that can flare up as a result. No longer is the discussion about the needs of people less fortunate, but about the equal rights that everybody is entitled to enjoy.

However, with equal rights comes equal responsibility to maintain those rights, not only for one's self, but for everyone, especially where there are rights abuses. All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights, and because of that, all human beings have a responsibility to maintain and protect those rights. It is this moral responsibility of everyone to address rights abuses that makes a rights-based approach so compelling and broad in scope. Everyone must do their part to address rights abuses so they will cease. In the words of Martin Luther King Jr., "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

Through a rights-based approach, it is everyone's responsibility to root out, expose, and address injustice and rights abuses. No longer can poverty lie in the depoliticized shadows that it once did in a needs-based approach. Rights are suppressed everywhere, but no more so than in structurally poor societies. We are all responsible for identifying and addressing the causes of structural poverty so that abuses can be corrected and people can claim their rights.

Linking rights to development and humanitarianism offers an exciting approach to deal effectively with injustice issues in the world—certainly heady stuff for idealistic practitioners. Applying a rights-based framework and principles radically changes the way development is done. Skills relating to political assessment, political economy, conflict resolution, conflict management, inductive and experiential learning, facilitative approaches based on inclusivity, accountability, governance, training, and advocacy are all-important.

Much time and energy has been spent considering how this new approach will manifest itself at both a theoretical and a geopolitical level. However, consideration needs to be given to how humanitarian NGOs must radically rethink their approach and its effect on the way they work with target communities, as well as how it will affect host country national governments and donor relationships. Such an alternative approach will require different strategies and methodologies at many levels.

Communities: The Grassroots Level

To get to the root causes of structural poverty, more must be done than simply carrying out needs assessments and providing technical assistance. Much more must be understood about the socio-cultural and socio-political context of villages, communities, and regions. A firm understanding of history and how it has affected communities should be researched to gain information on the context of the situation. This requires experiential learning and

inductive processes whereby information is gathered from those most affected to understand what are the actual root causes of the problems. Various actors in a community must be identified and their relationships with each other analyzed. Who are the poor and vulnerable groups? How are their rights being usurped? Who are the powerbrokers involved and how are they marginalizing vulnerable groups or populations within the community? Who are the accomplices and intermediaries in the process of suppressing rights? Do groups and populations in communities even know what their rights are? These are but some of the questions that must be asked and later analyzed. In short, a problem must be identified and this process must be repeated in every community.

Often, NGOs will work directly with communities but usually will only meet opinion leaders, civic and religious leaders, and other elites. The poor and marginalized populations often end up being bypassed, as they are not on equal status as elites, nor do they have the opportunity to take time away from farming or other subsistence activities. People who eke out a living for their families usually have little time available to meet aid workers in villages. As such, efforts must be made to meet these sidelined populations. This certainly can be achieved, but it requires money and valuable time, not to mention staff prepared to spend time in remote, difficult-to-access areas.

Meeting with these different actors is a task in itself—gaining their trust so that they will be open and candid is another thing altogether. This is difficult when most NGOs spend so little time in the villages where they work. Staff may never even make it to villages they are assisting. Rather, they may depend on local elites from larger, easy-to-access villages to ensure that donations reach outlying areas. This naturally causes problems, as all too often contributions end up being used by elites to buy support in patron-client relationships.⁴ It is no wonder that some NGOs are seen with suspicion by communities: it appears to marginalized populations that these NGOs are working with local elites at the expense of targeted people in isolated, hard to reach areas. After all, it is the elites who consistently seem to benefit from local projects.

Linked to this is the requirement to be open, ensuring that information is shared with all parties. Many times information is controlled and managed by local elites to the advantage of their supporters. If an agency only targets information at vulnerable groups, it builds suspicion between vulnerable and elite groups, and could potentially exacerbate hostile tendencies between the groups. If it tries to ignore local leaders (who often are linked to other elites) problems arise relating to undermining local authorities. A way to overcome this is to be inclusive by sharing all information and ensuring that everyone in the community understands the agency's mission or project. Only by being open and engaging the entire community in the process will an inclusive system be built that reduces suspicion through dialogue and cooperation, enhancing mutual benefit. This is no simple feat, as it requires changing the attitudes of elites, who often view 'those people' as 'obviously inferior.'

Similarly, communities are likely to have little notion of the concept of human rights. Those that do have a basic understanding may feel threatened by such a concept. Human rights and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) have come under fire by many from the developing world as another attempt by the West to influence or control other countries. After all, in 1948, most developing countries did not have an opportunity to sign the UDHR or participate in the decision-making process, since they were seen as part of the colonial empire that subjugated them. Many in the developing world cite this sort of *noblesse oblige* paternalism and feel human rights are an import from the West, imposed by outsiders. Still, it does not mean that the whole idea should be shelved. Time must be invested with communities to establish locally accepted views of human rights by all sides. Underlying principles and themes can be highlighted and identified throughout the UDHR and linked to local socio-cultural norms, religious beliefs, and folklore. Important underlying principles include inclusiveness, the ability to have a voice, accountability, equality, openness, and representation.

By facilitating an open and inclusive process, an agency can assist groups within a community to identify and potentially agree on the root causes of poverty. In Sierra Leone this has been fairly easy. Ten years of war have exhausted the populace. From national government officials to village and traditional authorities to marginalized populations, there is a shared belief that bad governance, patronage, and unequal opportunity is at the heart of the problem. The conflict in Sierra Leone has its roots in poverty, corruption, and bad governance, especially in the rural areas. Agreeing that there is a problem is only the beginning. Changing a structure that has been in place for as long as anyone can remember is difficult, especially when those who are at the top of the structure are also in control of it. Yet the only way the process can grow is through inclusivity. Without it, there will be no effective process to address the core of structural poverty. Powerbrokers will sabotage advances made when the opportunity arises, reclaiming their status. If marginalized populations continue to be ignored, they will eventually resort to violent means.

National Governments and Donors: the Top Level

For real social change to happen it must grow from the grassroots yet be met from the top. Martin Luther King Jr. espoused and utilized this bottom-up, top-down strategy while working with segregated communities in the southern United States. King felt that if issues of oppression and rights abuses were not addressed in this manner, there would be no way to overcome powerbrokers and political elites in the south who suppressed the rights of African Americans. Therefore, he not only worked with communities to build a social structure based on the grassroots, but also advocated at the highest level to achieve the Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1964, by lobbying, advocating, and working with Vice-President Richard Nixon and Presidents Dwight D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, and Lyndon B. Johnson. Without legislation and efforts coming from the highest authorities,

King recognized that marginalized people in the south would never realize their inherent rights. In many ways Martin Luther King Jr. was a pioneer in linking human rights with economic development.

In the international arena, bottom-up/top-down strategies are equally important. But whereas King could only go as high as leaders of a nation, NGOs can go beyond that level to include donors to those nations. Often, national leaders and governments do not want to get involved with such sticky issues as rights, since they themselves may draw support from suppressors of rights. Worse yet, they may be guilty of suppressing the rights of the people they are entrusted to protect and govern.

Governments in many developing countries tend to fear talk of human rights. One of the worst mistakes that can be made is to interpret that fear as an assumption of guilt and refusal to deal with human rights issues. It is common for governments to see human rights initiatives and agendas as outside interference into its own domestic matters. It is even more common for governments to have misperceptions about human rights and what is meant by a rights-based approach.

Many in developing countries think human rights abuses relate only to the most vicious of atrocities, including rape, murder, mutilation, torture, and related brutality. Certainly these are abuses, but not the only types. Forbidding girls to attend school, discriminating on the basis of race, ethnicity, political opinion, national or social origin, and not allowing people to participate in the governance of one's community and country are abuses condemned by the UDHR. Likewise, governments may find themselves working to alleviate these same abuses—only they may not be considered as such, since the government itself may not view them through rights-colored glasses. NGOs can work with governments to alleviate those misperceptions and help them better understand human rights by establishing workshops and forums to better educate them on the concept.

Still, this may never come about if an NGO is not inclusive. Misperceptions build mistrust, and the best way to deal with misperceptions is through open communication. An advocacy role with marginalized populations is certainly needed, but the only way the process will advance is by including the holders of power: the government. Through dialogue and discussion with them, misperceptions can be corrected, trust built, and governments' own fears alleviated. Simply by engaging them in the larger discussion, a process is started that links governments with rights issues and victims of abuse. An agency can initiate this simply by playing the role of facilitator.

A government may very well want to deal more effectively with rights issues but may simply not be able to actualize them due to a number of hindrances endemic to developing countries. Civil services tend to be poorly managed, inefficient, bureaucratic, and bloated. Communication between government ministries may not be effective for a whole host of

reasons ranging from personnel issues to a lack of infrastructure, to a poorly understood long-term strategy, to competition for funds and influence within the administration.

A developing country may possess a strong central government that has inadequate ties to remote, weak, and ineffectual local government representation in rural areas. Lack of money and expertise to train government authorities and civil servants in the subject means that misperceptions continue. Likewise, effective media campaigns to inform the populace cannot be mounted if resources are not available. Capacity for understanding and dealing with human rights and issues of conflict resolution is very specialized. Universities and higher education institutions in developing countries and regions tend to offer quality degrees and courses in more practical areas, such as agriculture, construction, education, health, and engineering or mechanics. More specialized courses must be accessed from expensive universities abroad.

Many of these government weaknesses are NGO strengths. An agency may be able to advocate for rights while developing useful symbiotic relationships with governments, enabling both to achieve their goals. In areas where governments of developing countries are weak, agencies can work with them to build capacity and facilitate a process similar to what is espoused above. By doing so, a bureaucratic government can gain firsthand insight into abuses were they happen, especially at lower-level grassroots communities. Once this has occurred, governments can better understand the nature of the abuses as well as have a mechanism to link with the people they are meant to govern.

However, by taking a stand on rights, an NGO may run the risk of alienating the host government. After all, it is the responsibility of everyone to address rights abuses wherever they are manifest. Stated simply, a government may realize its policies are abusive towards certain groups of people—the exact reason the policy was established in the first place. Countries like this present the greatest stumbling blocks to rights-based approaches. By addressing rights issues in such countries, an agency commits political suicide. Confrontational relationships can grow, jeopardizing the agency's reputation and status in the country. Agencies, staff, management, and their families may become targets of low-level harassment by the host government. These passive-aggressive tactics may include delaying customs and clearing processes of imported goods vital to the agency, repeatedly targeting agency vehicles at checkpoints for time consuming inspections, denying visas or withholding immigration and visa information, implicating agency staff and management in protracted police investigations, as well as numerous other mechanisms. Marginalized populations may be targeted as well. At the other end of the spectrum, more aggressive tactics could be employed aimed at bringing an end to the mission (or notifying key staff to leave). This could be as clear as making an agency cease operations and terminating its projects or delivering official letters to various individuals stating a 24 or 48 hour deadline to leave the country, because the government cannot guarantee their safety.

In these cases there are no easy answers. Such intimidation tactics weigh heavily on the leaders of missions. For every step forward an agency takes in helping marginalized populations realize their rights, it may take two steps back from fulfilling its overall mission. If an agency is seen to be on a 'Western crusade,' those backward steps will lead to rapid closure of the mission. Effective strategies of cautious advocacy and government engagement need to be devised.

Donors may provide part of the answer. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the European Commission, and the British Department for International Development (DFID) all have initiatives linked to promoting human rights. Likewise, these donors provide significant funding to developing countries and wield considerable clout.

To understand the roots of structural poverty and where rights abuses are taking place, NGOs utilizing rights-based frameworks must make use of political and conflict analysis. This puts their work more in line with many donors. A richer, more comprehensive political analysis of a country's context and situation can be produced. NGOs tend to have a stronger understanding of the grassroots level, while donors tend to have a stronger understanding of the governmental level. Utilizing both strengths, analysis that is more comprehensive can be created. Additionally, more concerted and coordinated efforts can be made to address rights issues effectively with the bottom-up and top-down strategy.

Utilizing this lateral pressure tactic, NGOs may be able to establish successful relationships with problem governments. Fostering and using donor community leverage to engage governments in addressing rights issues could be beneficial to both the donor governments and NGOs. The NGO continues with its rights-based activities in countries where it is most needed, while the donor government is seen to be taking a practical, pro-active stand on human rights.⁵ This pressure on the government makes it less likely that aggressive tactics of retribution would take place, as the assumption prevails that donors would cease funding if they did occur. However, the door is still left open for passive-aggressive tactics of intimidation.

Though such a relationship holds great promise, it appears to be distant, at least at any formalized level. Some donors do talk about rights and linking them to humanitarianism to alleviate structural poverty, but how this will manifest itself is still murky. Donors are less interested in research and political analysis from NGOs as they are in utilizing these organizations to deliver various forms of aid to 'needy victims.' Bags of bulgur, rice, and corn-soya blend, gallons of vegetable oil, and cans of processed beef all with the word 'gift' stamped on them are more visible than efforts to establish long-term, community-based processes aimed at dealing with issues of patronage. It is not important that this food is arguably neither wanted nor necessary. What seems to be important is that donor governments have surplus stocks of this food and are, ironically, cultivating their own

domestic patron-client relationships.⁶ Pork barrel politics knows no boundaries, yet the effects are more devastating in the poorest countries.

Donors want to see quantified results from projects with clear goals, objectives, and measurable indicators. The more qualitative the project, the more difficult it is to get quantifiable results. It is considerably easier to show how many tons of food or seed have been distributed than it is to quantify rights abuses and quick, effective mechanisms to address them. Unfortunately, it becomes a numbers game and a race against the clock. If one agency cannot do it, there are many others around competing for the same funds.

New approaches are untried. Donors want to ensure that an agency knows what it is doing and can deliver what it promises. Historically, humanitarian NGOs have not worked with rights issues, so the concept is new to them. Donors will naturally remain cautious of a project or approach when questions remain, especially considering that donor funds come from taxpaying citizens. Dealing with rights and governance issues is a very slow, long-term process with many unknowns. Any project focusing on social change will certainly meet many challenges and require considerable time to evolve working methodologies. Furthermore, because of the nature of rights-based projects, a large degree of flexibility is needed in administering them. Human beings are imperfect creatures and behave in unpredictable ways, which makes it difficult to set goals, objectives, and indicators.

Conclusion

Linking rights and humanitarianism is a step in the right direction. But like most things that are new and worthwhile, it will take a concerted effort to make the needed changes in the way the humanitarian industry currently operates. Moving away from depoliticized poverty and understanding it through a rights framework will take time. Developing effective methodologies and relationships at every level will be an even longer process, and time is not an oversupplied commodity for most NGOs. A clear challenge for agencies will be how to increase the amount of quality time to a project when no time is available. More staff (and thus more funding) will be needed to take up the challenge. Improved team-based management structures will also be required to share information between projects effectively.

The poor, in general, are very practical people. They must deal regularly with urgent and pressing needs, usually at the expense of planning for future long-term benefits. In many countries, especially in West Africa, when election time draws near, gifts, offerings, and handouts by ruling elites are standard. These offerings usually come with promises of more. Malaria treatment packets and bags of rice are but some of what is given to the poor to win their vote. Many poor people do not even have a fundamental understanding of the electoral process, let alone democratic political systems. Introducing rights-based frameworks and building understanding of these takes significant amounts of time,

especially in the beginning. Many communities have little or no notion of democratic civic responsibility, making the problem that much more difficult to alleviate. This is compounded by the fact that most poor people are illiterate and uneducated. Over time, people are likely to become familiar with some of the terminology and jargon if they are participating in a rights-based project, but still do not put these ideas into practice. They simply become buzzwords, empty of any conceptual relevance and devoid of any practical social change.

Only if the various groups of a community themselves lead and own this process will these buzzwords have any meaning. NGOs can help facilitate this process, ensuring that it is representative and inclusive of all actors involved. These agencies can act as a catalyst in the process, yet must strike a balance between facilitating a community process and administering a project that is more concerned with meeting its own project objectives and donor reporting mechanisms than facilitating social change. If they choose the latter cookie-cutter approach, with standardized indicators of success instituted by the donor, communities will not make the process theirs. However, if they tailor and customize the approach so that communities take ownership and understand it, fundamental rights abuses at the core of structural poverty can be addressed. Any change must come from within, or NGO and donor efforts will survive for only as long as these organizations remain in the community. For an outside agency, the trickiest part of working with a social change process is guiding it and letting it evolve in its own way, not directing it.

Human rights are universal. Focusing on some violations while ignoring others is not acceptable, as it further depoliticizes the concept. Poverty, rights abuses, and politics must all be accepted as intrinsically linked. Speaking out against this will be problematic for NGOs seeking Western donor funding. Indeed, few NGOs spoke out against the recent war in Afghanistan where an entire nation was attacked, bombed, and invaded by a coalition of the world's most powerful nations. Decimating an entire country in the search for one man has violated the rights of millions of ordinary Afghans, jeopardized their lives and future, and pushed them deeper into poverty. To no one's surprise, the attacking nations are also the world's most powerful donors. If any NGO were truly following a rights framework, it would not have retreated to the safe, ever-present shadows of depoliticized poverty. Instead of talking about the needs of victims and establishing humanitarian corridors, they should have been speaking out against such blatant rights violations by the U.S., Britain, and others. Instead nearly all were silent as they lined up to get a slice of the donor pie and expand their overall budget and operating areas.

This recent event makes it appear that linking rights with humanitarianism still has a long way to go. Donor relationships need to be re-thought and alternative non-political funding sources developed. Some NGOs are further along in this than others, but these organizations are also significantly smaller. The idea of only targeting rights violations in developing countries while ignoring donor country abuses not only smacks of

discrimination and colonialism, it is hypocritical and advances an agenda of rights abuses by the powerful.

NGOs also need to address issues around rights within their own organizational culture. Rights-based approaches may be possible and to varying degrees successful, but they will not make much of a difference unless changes are made at the administrative level. Organizational culture must be changed to embrace a culture of rights. In most NGOs, there is great disparity between local hire national staff and expatriate international staff. Differences in salary scales, benefits packages, evacuation insurance, employment rights, and job security are staggeringly high between expatriate and national staff, even though national staff may have more experience and a similar education background for managerial positions. If NGOs and donor agencies are going to have a solid rights-foundation from which to lead, much needs to be done to address these double standards. National staff, working within rights-based frameworks, feel marginalized, stating with disdain that their agency protects the rights of communities in which it works while their own rights are ignored. The implicit ethical message tends to reflect the problem of many developing countries: those in power have more rights than those beneath them.

This article has highlighted how right abuses can be rectified in a rights-based framework. NGOs and donors can press host nation governments to become more rights oriented. Similarly, donors may be pressed by NGOs to take a firmer stand against an offending government, as well as leveraging such governments. These are not the only players involved in protecting the rights of those who have been marginalized. Every human being has the responsibility to speak out against human rights violations and protect the human rights of those less fortunate. Not only do donor taxpayers have a responsibility, but also every one of us who lives in the global community.

Many structural poverty issues reach into our daily lives, further implicating and prodding us to act on our responsibility. Diamonds, oil, aluminum, gold, semi-precious metals for cell-phones, silver, coffee, tea, cocoa for chocolate production, and many other resources from West and Central Africa, as well as Latin America, are all linked to rights abuses in their countries of origin. Some are more blatant than others, like teak, mahogany, ebony, rosewood, ironwood and other hardwoods exploited by President Charles Taylor in Liberia, who has pocketed the profits from these national resources for himself. Consumers and corporations alike need to be more aware of such practices and work to change behavior. NGOs and donors do not hold a corner on the market in the rights business. Everyone has a part to play and leverage.

Notes

¹ Typically males aged 15 to as old as 40.

² Both sides have cited this type of corruption as a reason for taking up arms and, despite hopeful claims to the contrary that disarmament has been completed, this is in part why caches of weapons are hidden in the bush by both sides.

³ Hugo Slim, “Not Philanthropy But Right: Rights Based Humanitarianism and the Proper Politicization of Humanitarian Philosophy,” paper presented at a seminar: *Debates, Dilemmas and Dissension* (London: Commonwealth Institute, February 1, 2001).

⁴ A person in authority is likely to be seen as having ‘brought’ the NGO to the community, so others must give a portion of the inputs to that authority—that is if they are lucky enough to get anything in the first place.

⁵ In such cases the NGO may act as a buffer for the donor government, enabling the donor to distance itself from any public relations problems that may arise—a precarious situation indeed for the NGO.

⁶ Much of this food aid has been genetically modified and presents a number of ethical concerns, least of which is paternalism.