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## Towards a Better Discourse: Is Rights-Talk Challenging the Development Profession?

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In 1993, Robert Chambers cautioned that the field of development was becoming too specialized. He argued that this specialization, rampant in many fields, led to a conservative and “normal” approach that failed to produce innovation and growth. Chambers wrote:

Foresters stick to trees, and moreover to trees in the forest and forest plantations which they control. Animal specialists stick to animals—the animals about which they have been trained. Agricultural scientists stick to crops, those in which they have specialized. Civil engineers in irrigation stick to design and construction, with a little maintenance, and hold back from operation and management. In such ways, only the familiar is faced. Professions are inbred and look inwards.<sup>1</sup>

When development and human rights meet, both fields are forced to look beyond their traditional paradigms. In the ensuing debate, regardless of whether they are advocating for a rights-based approach, the right to development, or rejecting such ideas, practitioners are forced to go beyond the lexicon and specialties so long preserved. In the least, we can say that this confrontation has led to better discourse among development professionals.

It is true that this discourse, as cautioned earlier in this journal by Peter Uvin and Hugo Slim, can be “fluff” and “thinly disguised repackaging of old wine in new bottles.” But it is equally true that the discourse challenges the conservative nature of the development field and, by redefining the debate, pushes the profession to move beyond the *déjà vu* complex of revisiting older paradigms as new innovations every other decade. By engaging in ‘rights-talk,’ we necessarily change the composition of those involved in the dialogue and bring in new voices and perspectives that were previously housed in the office next door.

To be sure, talking about human rights and development leads to better discourse about development as practitioners and scholars are forced to expand their dialogue and thinking. This beneficial cross-fertilization took place at a recent conference held at Tufts University (February 27- March 1, 2002) to address the conflict in eastern Congo. The conference, entitled “Promoting Human Security in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)” was sponsored by the UNDP, The Tufts Nutrition School, The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, The Alan Feinstein International Famine Center, and The Institute for Human Security.

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So what happens when you put together a group of different-minded and -trained professionals? Not only are the backgrounds diverse but measures of success and professional ethics differ greatly as well.<sup>2</sup> Development workers tend to look towards the effective and “goal-oriented transfer of resources... increasing social welfare or... global equality.”<sup>3</sup> Human Rights workers measure quality in terms of the “establishment and incorporation of human rights norms and legal rules in a given culture.” The convergence of the fields presents an opportunity both to re-examine their traditions and procedures and to benefit from cross-fertilization.

The situation in the DRC represents a remarkable opportunity to bring together the many sides of this debate. As is explained in the on-line presentation of the conflict and the conference:

The Democratic Republic of the Congo constitutes one of the worst tragedies the world has ever faced. Decades of economic, social, and political mismanagement have been compounded by two consecutive wars fought over a six-year period resulting in untold numbers of deaths and displacement.<sup>4</sup> ...In the DRC, concerns of conflict resolution, human rights, humanitarianism, and development are deeply interlinked. Practitioners in these fields are forced to think beyond their usual professional and organizational boundaries. Under these extreme circumstances, courageous people seek to promote peace, rebuild economic systems, and end human rights violations. This conference will allow participants to focus attention on such exemplary acts of courage with an overall objective of supporting them in order to promote human security in the DRC.<sup>5</sup>

The conference was divided into four workshops, each dealing with an important aspect of the conflict and emergency in the DRC: 1) The Interface of Human Rights and Humanitarian Action, 2) The Economic Dimensions of the Complex Emergency, 3) Strengthening Local Communities for Peace, and 4) The Diplomatic Dimension: Search for Coherence.

The conference drew a distinguished panel of participants, such as Peter Rosenblum, Larry Minear, and Andre Bourque, whose work and writings are well known and respected. Several pertinent themes emerged from both the formal discussions and observations made informally. It is to these that we now turn.

### **No Discipline Is an Island**

In spite of the title of the conference and guidelines laid out for all of the workshops, the discussion in each group traveled to many other topics. This was not a failure on the part of the participants or the moderators, but rather an acknowledgement that none of these issues can be dealt with in a vacuum. Indeed, all of the issues are interrelated and interdependent. ‘Crossing boundaries’ in this sense is not only an academic exercise, but also a crucial task. One of the solutions discussed in Workshop 2, for example, was to apply the recommendations of the UN Panel on Illegal Exploitation to explain the nature

of the conflict in the Congo—specifically, that it is not a rebellion, but rather a fight over markets and resources. The Congolese war economy hides under a rising tide of disenchantment, expressed through growing xenophobia in the shape of (among other things) hate campaigns claiming that foreigners are raping the country. It is therefore not sufficient to deal with the war economy in economic terms alone. Economic interventions must be linked to psycho-cultural ones that take into consideration Rwandan, Ugandan, and—in general—foreign involvement.

However, the groups, led by the human rights workshop, felt that the workshops as they were divided were ‘preaching to the choir’ and that this strengthened the divide between rights-talk and operationalization that already existed. It was necessary to infiltrate the other discussions. So the four workshops combined and divided again into two groups: one focusing on development and the other on politics.

### **Hats off!**

As pointed out by a conference moderator, one of the most powerful aspects of the workshop was the informal dialogue that took place. “In the formal discussion participants tend to wear their organizational hat, and speak as the mouth piece of their institution.”<sup>6</sup> All the participants arrived with their organizational or academic backgrounds coloring their formal, reported speech. But in off-the-record settings, participants could discuss issues and share information and insights without needing to defend their vested interests. This opportunity had many benefits. It built a level of trust among the participants from different disciplines—resulting in effective collaboration—and represented an opportunity to share information in a field where access to current details can be difficult.

The informal information exchanges at these conferences are vitally important. You will see the same NGO person who earlier in the day decried the attempt to involve development workers in the monitoring of human rights sitting next to the human rights worker at a dinner with huge smiles as they share information with each other than otherwise would not be possible without compromising their positions.<sup>7</sup>

### **Power Play**

The power of a conference, and its conclusions, is a significant issue for both scholars and practitioners. In the various discussions, there was concern about imposing outside ideas on the people of the Congo. Although several participants were Congolese nationals, the majority of the participants hailed from Western countries. On the other hand, there was frustration that the recommendations from the conference were aimed at the international community, which, by itself, was impotent.

There was equal frustration that a minimal consensus among participants about innovations they considered important was formed, but that this consensus held little chance of being heard among more powerful actors such as donors and the Security Council. Some participants felt equally impotent about their own intermediary role. As carriers of the message, they were unsure if there was a conduit for listening. Nonetheless, at the conclusion of the conference, a Central Tufts Committee was formed to develop a cohesive message about the situation and needs in the Congo and then design an outreach strategy.

### **Personality**

That the conference had attracted very different personalities with very different takes on addressing complex emergencies became apparent in the final discussions. At the outset, the ultimate goal of the three-day conference had been a list of concrete steps for the participants to take back with them to the Congo. Some may argue that the actual outcome, a guiding list of recommendations to the World Bank and to the UNDP Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery respectively, was equally important. Consequently, issues of mandate, levels of realistic influence, and proposals for action plans became topics of debate during the last day of the conference. The suggestions came to involve the briefing of U.S. Senators John Kerry and Edward Kennedy, EU governments, and the media, and the establishment of a committee and an Internet chat room for further discussions. Before we knew it, a completely new structure consisting of various kinds of managers had been proposed to carry on the much-needed work that originally should have been the outcome of the conference in the first place. Contributions ranged on a continuum from very idealistic to more realistic to cynical. Fear was expressed that the conference would turn out to be nothing more than a feel-good experience with no concrete results for the people trapped in the conflict, as so often happens with even the best-intentioned conferences. However, even the skeptics expressed hope for this particular conference. It had brought a renewed and sharper focus on the conflict, and the gathering of people, who have a real ability to make a difference, had created an important synergy effect that, many believed, could carry the outcome into implementation.

### **The Real World**

It has now been exactly one month since the conference was declared adjourned. Many of the participants are back in the Congo and the region, others returned to Europe, and some remain in Boston. What did they get out of the conference? What, if any, concrete points did they take with them back to their work? How much of the synergy effect still exists between the practitioners and the scholars? In another two months, it will be time for the proposed evaluation of the entire process, and answers may emerge during that process. Yet, it is fairly easy to engage in rights-talk on paper and harder to make the institutional changes that a true shift in practice or research requires. The success of the dialogue, as discussed earlier, may be subtle and hard to gauge, but changes among

practitioners and scholars should be visible in their subsequent work. We should not hesitate to judge the conference concretely as well as philosophically.

So far, follow-up activities include the production of a document consisting of summary presentations of the work of the four workshops, and the concluding points of the conference. Other follow-up activities proposed include a chat room, translations of all the conference documents into French and local Congolese languages, and fine-grained research of local economic hybrids, which was said to be one of the very important first steps.<sup>8</sup> But at the time of this writing, none of these conference follow-ups has begun.

It is crucial for the success of the entire process that hope, sincerity, and confidence remain high. These psychological features are much needed in this long-lasting, manipulated, and thus complex emergency in order to keep the work of this group of exceptional individuals on track, and to carry the process into a successful phase of implementation that will lead to significant and highly needed changes in the Congo. Unless effective follow-up is implemented, the motivation of the participants may vanish, and the value of the dialogue may be lost.

### Wrapping It Up

Although the information transfer from ‘South’ to ‘North/West’ at the conference took place far removed from the conflict zone in the “snug security of citadels of learning with their traditional textbooks, treadmill teaching, conservative curricula and assurance of timeless knowledge,”<sup>9</sup> “Promoting Human Security in the Democratic Republic of the Congo” was a step towards creating a better, more comprehensive discourse about development. The fact that we are now mixing the ideas of scholars and practitioners—and indeed devoting an entire workshop to the integration of rights into development—testifies to the growing commitment the development community has towards trying to understand and grapple with rights-talk. The stew in which we have thrown buzzwords for the past half-century may not be fully cooked, but it is indeed becoming richer.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Robert Chambers, *Challenging the Profession* (London: Intermediate Technology Publications, 1993), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Hans-Otto Sano, “Development and Human Rights: The Necessary, but Partial Integration of Human Rights and Development,” *Human Rights Quarterly*, 22.3 (2000), 734-752, available at: [http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/human\\_rights\\_quarterly/toc/hrq22.3.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/human_rights_quarterly/toc/hrq22.3.html)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> See <http://fletcher.tufts.edu/news/2002/february/hsconference.html>

<sup>5</sup> See <http://fletcher.tufts.edu/humansecurity/conference/DRC%20Conference%20webindex.htm>

<sup>6</sup> Conference notes.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> An economic hybrid is a way of explaining a situation in which economic theory, with all its assumptions, does not apply, as is typically the case in conflict zones.

<sup>9</sup> Chambers, *Challenging the Profession*, ix.