
Preface: Rights, Solidarity, and Development

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The relationship between rights and development is nothing new. Two cases from the 1980s and early 1990s when I was the President of Oxfam America illustrate this point. The first comes from the Amazon in Ecuador. Oxfam America had been working with indigenous populations in the Amazon for many years undertaking development programs. It became clear to the indigenous leadership that development efforts were not sufficient. Their way of life was disappearing; their land was being destroyed. They decided that they needed legal right to the land that they always thought they had owned. They talked; they petitioned; they demonstrated; they publicized their plight. Nothing helped. They decided that the only solution was to have a massive march up to the capital and occupy the President's Palace until their right to the land was recognized. They asked Oxfam America to fund this march. We did not hesitate. We funded the march. The indigenous people carried out their plans and were partly successful in their demands.

The second case comes from El Salvador. Oxfam America was providing seeds and tools to farmers during the civil war in a remote area of the country. At one point the military police came to an Oxfam America partner group to arrest its leaders. They rounded them up and tied their thumbs behind their backs to take them away to certain torture and death. The Oxfam America representative who happened to be there at the time confronted the military. He told them that they would have to take him as well. He risked his life for the safety of our partners. They were released unharmed.

In both these cases Oxfam America based its decisions on the concept of solidarity. Development was not projects and programs, but rather a commitment to work with communities to ensure their rights, development, and freedom. Solidarity with one's partners and a rights-based approach throw traditional development concepts into the dustbin of history. Success on the ground is measured not only by quantifiable project indicators, but also by the empowerment of people and communities to take control of their political and economic destinies.

Development agencies are falling over themselves to jump on the bandwagon of the rights-based approach to development. Human rights, such as economic, social, and political rights are the new buzzwords. For some, the rights-based approach is the new magic bullet, the key strategy for success.

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Unfortunately, most development agencies have not thought through what the implications are of a rights-based approach—for their agency, their partners, their donors, and their staff.

I am not at all convinced that international NGOs will do more than pay lip service to a rights-based approach. Are NGOs willing to advocate not just for more money for themselves and their partners, but also for necessary structural changes and for changes to social, economic, and political policies that oppress people? Are they willing to fund partners who wade into the political processes of their countries to advocate for the rights of minorities and the impoverished? I question whether NGOs with significant percentages of their budgets coming from government sources have the independence to be able to implement a rights-based approach without drawing the ire (and loss) of their donors.

Human rights advocates and lawyers are on the forefront of the effort to adopt a rights-based approach to development. They are used to the role of advocate, of whistle blower. They are used to being outsiders trying to change corrupt, imperfect systems. Development experts, particularly practitioners, are used to just the opposite. They have been inside players, workers within the system, often, inadvertently or not, propping up corrupt systems.

NGOs are eager to embrace the rights-based approach in theory. In practice it is another matter. For an agency that embraces the rights-based approach or a solidarity approach to development, what is the appropriate mix between bread and butter projects such as tools and seeds and political advocacy? Will the latter make the former impossible? At Oxfam America we were able to juggle this divide—but not always successfully.

This issue of *PRAXIS* is timely and important. It brings together some of the recent thinking on the relationship between rights and development. Practitioners and academics, human rights experts, and development scholars share their expertise and opinions. This dialogue between practitioners and academics, between rights advocates and development experts, needs to be expanded and deepened for the benefit of those who are oppressed and those who are denied their rights in today's world.