
PRAXIS Interviews Practitioners: Dismas Nkunda

Is there a right to development?

Certainly. Under-development and poverty are the most brutal denial of human rights. Development entails the attainment of basic needs: the right to food and decent housing, freedom from fear, and the right to education. This follows from the notion that human rights are founded on respect for the dignity and worth of all human beings. The right to education, work with equal pay, and an adequate standard of living are universally accepted.

Does your institution incorporate human rights into its mandate?

Our fundamental mandate is the protection of human rights wherever there is abuse. In areas where there is a gross violation, we have been very vocal in advocating for the preservation of refugee rights. We do advocacy by calling on those abusing the rights of others to stop, and if they do not, we call for international action against the perpetrators.

What mechanisms should be created within aid organizations to address human rights in their work?

The rights-based approach to development requires that human rights be part of the development process. Many aid agencies such as Save the Children Fund, the International Rescue Committee and CARE have incorporated human rights as part of their work in the field. This is mainly because humanitarian/development agencies have a stronger presence than human rights organizations and they can use that presence to enhance the protection of rights. International donor agencies are increasingly linking development assistance to a good human rights record. A recent example was the reduction of aid to countries like Malawi and Zimbabwe that resulted from an unsatisfactory human rights record. Other countries like Uganda have had their aid reduced because of a marked deterioration in human rights.

How should the aid community react to human rights violations?

In most cases, violations of human rights result from the actions of states and of government officials. In areas where such violations take place, it is the duty of aid agencies to make clear that any aid is contingent on the state's preservation of the rights of its citizens.

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Development workers can also be overseers. First, they can profile abuses and provide details for advocacy purposes. This role is crucial to the whole process of protecting rights. Working in association with traditional human rights advocacy groups, development workers can provide useful information without compromising their mandate. Second, if development workers are driven by the notion of preserving rights, then it is fundamental that they practice development where there is a reciprocal observance of those rights. The rights-based approach to development can help provide wider legitimacy to human rights and to those working and advocating for their realization. The added value of this approach is that it leads to accountability for human rights on the part of recipient governments, bilateral and multilateral donors, and other development actors.

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

Conflict situations are mainly characterized by denials or abuses of fundamental rights by the antagonists in a conflict. Doing development in such areas has the potential to create conflicts of interest by perpetuating abuses of human rights. Development funding and activities are easily manipulated to satisfy the whims of one party to the conflict at the expense of the rights of people who are, in many situations, not a party. The problem is compounded by the needs of different stakeholders. In many cases, funding for development work is divorced from the prerequisite of a free society whose rights are upheld. In the process, most of the aid community's activities end up being used for the purpose of exacerbating human rights abuses.

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?

Regional developmental models have the advantage of relevance to local contexts and thus, are more tailored to the needs of those targeted. There is also a greater feeling of ownership of the model that helps deflect the notion of 'imported development.' Models can be adapted to changing situations as they are deemed fit. Regional development frameworks are best suited to helping set out the context and the priority areas of development. My thinking is that there should be more interaction between regional and global development models.

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

- Wit;
- To be able to count and account for every penny;

- A listening ear and sharp eyes, an easygoing nature, and no assumption of ‘I know it all;’
- Ability to accept defeat and quit;
- Passion for and will to do good for those in need;
- Understanding of the workings of international development policies.

What has been the most rewarding experience in your career?

Being part of a committed force working towards creating respect for rights. My current work on Africa is very rewarding.

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

Finding the perfect interplay between individual rights and the right to development. I'm always fascinated by the relationship between the right to development in which all peoples are entitled to participate, and the real world where the individual's rights are sacrificed on the altar of the right to development. While all these rights are important for mankind, this interplay tends to limit individual rights by looking at the human being as a speck in the world's eyes. In developing countries, where the gains of collective rights have brought no dividends, individual rights have turned out to be one of those things that are heard of but not seen. I think that the right to development is relative to who determines what development is. Who sets the benchmarks for development? Who gains from it?

What do you consider success in development?

In my opinion, success in development comes only when there is positive change in the lives of the underprivileged. There is however the problem of doing harm in the process of development. The notion of transposing ‘held views’ of development and imparting them to those considered to be needy has more often than not created greater dependency than is initially anticipated. Development has had the negative effect of undermining what already exists and killing local expertise—not to mention livelihoods.