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Rights-Based Approaches to Development

Introduction by Sarah Hamilton

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This digest offers a multidimensional, well-chosen, and timely compilation of resources analyzing the myriad relationships between fields devoted to the realization of human rights and human development. I appreciate having the opportunity to introduce the issue for two reasons. First, the contributors perform a tremendous service to both fields. They have created an accessible pathway to works that engage: the normative, substantive, and empirical dimensions of the human rights/development nexus; key debates among theoreticians, policy-makers, and practitioners concerning this nexus; inclusive analysis of institutional frameworks and actors; and attention to both opportunities for, and challenges to, the realization of increasingly holistic and converging visions of human rights and sustainable human development. This contribution is invaluable. Second, introducing this issue allows me to highlight briefly some of the bases for the mutual understanding and cooperation needed to realize common human rights and human development agendas.

On the development side of the movement toward convergence is an increasingly broad acknowledgement that economic growth does not inevitably lead to gains in human development (encompassing freedom to promote and maintain human dignity and to realize one's potential, material quality of life, non-exploitative employment, productivity, socio-political participation, and security, among other dimensions) for a majority of the populations in countries experiencing even relatively long-term growth. Thus, economic growth cannot be viewed as the measure, or even the linchpin, of sustainable development, which (for at least the past two centuries) has included social as well as economic ends. At the level of the state, sustainability rests not only on the use of economic gains for investment in human development, but for a distribution of such investment that serves to decrease inequality in assets and access to institutions of power. The growing emphasis on equity and human development (albeit at times using an efficiency-based argument) has been complemented by a more holistic view of both the ends and means of development that takes into account environmental sustainability issues; roles for civil society and the private sector; community-based approaches; and explicit attention to racial, ethnic, social and bio-social (e.g., women and children) groups that are most marginalized from the intended benefits of development. Development is now broadly defined as a field of endeavor that aims to further indivisible human rights, as codified in international standards.

Growing attention to issues of inequality and discrimination brings development thought and practice to the shores of human rights discourses, which emphasize not only the ends, but also the means, of development processes. Human rights also provides a framework for rights-based development efforts to hold both state and non-state actors accountable for protection of economic, political, social, and cultural rights of their client populations. Indeed, a human rights focus encouraged development institutions to greatly increase efforts in the areas of civil and political rights as integral to the development process. Development has become a field of action

encompassing not only the capacitation of marginalized groups, but also of those actors engaged in establishing, monitoring and enforcing rights regimes. In turn, development brings to human rights perspectives grounded in long-term observations of social, political, economic, and cultural dynamics that act to support or constrain the realization of rights. At the level of implementation, the fields offer complementary institutions, tools, and other resources that can produce an effort greater than the sum of its parts.

As example, the United Nations Development Programme, discussed below, presents a vivid challenge to proponents of human rights: “The torture of a single individual rightly raises public outrage. Yet the deaths of more than 30,000 children every day from mainly preventable causes go unnoticed. Why? Because these children are invisible in poverty. Poverty eradication is a major human rights challenge of the 21st century” (Human Development Report 2000: 8). Readers of this issue will be directed to cumulative evidence, critical analysis, and creative proposals aimed at strengthening human rights through genuinely rights-based development.

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