

Factfile

Frequently asked questions about rights based programming

What are human rights?

Human rights underpin all rights-based programming. These are universal and entitle all people to basic conditions supporting their efforts to live in peace and dignity and to develop their full potential as human beings. No human rights are conditional upon any behaviour, save that we should respect each other's human rights.

What is it?

A rights-based approach to programming deliberately and explicitly focuses on people realising their human rights. Therefore issues such as accountability, participation, empowerment, justice and non-discrimination become central both to the aims and process of programming. The overall purpose is to create lasting solutions that stand a far greater chance of succeeding because they are based on realising people's rights. With this approach human rights are both the end and the means of development. The United Nations states that human rights, justice, peace and the goals of development are all linked.

What is the difference between rights and needs?

Rights generate duties and responsibilities, whereas needs do not. Rights imply objective standards against which responsibilities can be measured, needs do not necessarily require this. Responding to needs is often seen as a charitable approach in which people depend on compassion or good will rather than a legally enforceable claim.

How does a rights' perspective change the way we view our work?

A rights' perspective requires us to view our beneficiaries as rights-bearers who, because they are human beings, can claim minimum levels of treatment, services and opportunity, and who exist in a wider context – a society – within which such claims are either respected or ignored. A rights based approach demands work is viewed in this broader context.

How and when did rights based programming emerge?

There were a variety of reasons:

1. In the 1990s disillusionment with the ineffectiveness of some development programmes set in. Until then development had largely been focused on economic development. Acknowledgement of the importance of social and cultural development paved the way for a shift towards rights based programming as delivering more effective and lasting solutions as it actively engages those it is seeking to help.
2. The end of the Cold War made the full range of rights a common goal for the international community.
3. In 1997 the UN launched its Programme for Reform when the Secretary-General called on all entities to mainstream human rights into their various activities and programmes within the framework of their respective mandates. This has spearheaded the move to RBA which has now been taken up with varying degrees of speed by NGOs and donor organisations.

Who is introducing it?

A variety of UN agencies, NGOs, bilateral donor agencies have decided to take up the challenge of RBAs.

Is it just for big organisations?

No, it is for organisations of all sizes, but introducing RBA needs time, patience and the backing of all those involved. This may also increase costs in the short term. It also puts new demands on partnerships – if one NGO has introduced RBA, working with another who has not adopted this approach could be increasingly difficult.

What do donors think of it?

Donors have varied in their eagerness or concern about adopting RBAs. In Sweden the tradition of social democracy hastened its implementation, in Switzerland it was the Rwandan genocide – the country had been a long time donor and was appalled at its inability to foresee the conflict. In other donor countries, a range of factors have played a part in delaying adoption such as political opposition, concerns that RBA creates technical problems, a view that it is already being practised although not in name, and finally a belief that it is unrealistic.

What about children and RBA?

Children's rights, enshrined in the CRC, are concerned both with the protection of the individual child and with the creation of the conditions in which all children can develop to their full potential. They call upon adults to ensure these are fulfilled. In the general RBA debate children's special case can sometimes be overlooked. There are many inherent advantages in child-focused development and relief organisations adopting RBA. For example, the Convention and its near-universal ratification is a good foundation, NGOs are listened to by the Committee on the Rights of the Child, and child-focused development organisations have clear principles as a framework assisting their move to RBA: the best interest of the child, non-discrimination, and participation. Participation is both an end and a means, a good in itself, it empowers children to achieve other rights and change their status in society.

What are the problems?

Time, the willingness of staff to adopt new methods, concerns about increased politicisation may all be seen as obstacles to adopting RBAs. RBA may or may not involve entering into opposition with those who hold the power to deny rights, through denouncements of violators, legal enforcement and promoting collaborative ways. There have also been doubts cast on its long term future: is it just the latest development fad and a utopian dream with no chance of becoming mainstream practice?