

The VIEW

The 1990s saw the emergence and eventual currency of the 'rights-based approach' described by the Overseas Development Institute as one that "invokes the international apparatus of human rights accountability in support of development action". The upsurge was fuelled in the mid-late 90s significantly by the interest of multilaterals, most notably the United Nations and the World Bank, key bilateral aid agencies, and large international non-government donor organisations.

To Oxfam, the approach broadens terrain. For one, it rightfully expands the

as almost a tangible thing. And with this clear sensibility, not cluttered with jargon, societies can be urged to draw up objectives, targets, roles, accountabilities, and action plans.

Oxfam International is seen as a leading promoter of the rights-based approach. In 2000, all 12 affiliates within Oxfam International, including Oxfam Hong Kong, formally embraced the rights-based approach to development, as expressed in rights-language, i.e., the right to a sustainable livelihood, to basic social services, to life and security, to be heard, to gender equity and cultural diversity, and

OXFAM *and* BASIC

Approaching poverty with a perspective of rights and legislation has many benefits, advocates Roger Ricafort.

definition of the term 'human rights' to include economic, social and cultural rights, not just civil and political rights, which had long been incomplete. It sees development as an inherent right of people (rights-holders) and the fulfillment of this right as a responsibility of the international community – both state and non-state actors (duty-bearers). It also considers the formal international legal rights regime of agreements, systems and conventions – albeit imperfect – as an additional arena for development agenda-setting and action, and for enforcing accountabilities.

In other words, the framework links the person to the system. It presents rights

to global citizenship. The affiliates all engage with organisations and allies in the developing world to create rights-based agendas and action plans.

Yet, the rights-based approach in 2006 remains a largely northern and donor language – a convergence towards a truly global consensus has yet to happen. Oxfam has an urgent role to play in assisting and strengthening community groups around the developing world with this process. Only with a wide range of development actors – from big business to activists, from rich countries to the poorest – can poverty and injustice ever be fully addressed.

In fact, this rights-related language and action is not new to Oxfam Hong

Kong, as its official Vision Statement, written in the early 1990s, reflects: 'Oxfam Hong Kong's vision is of a world where people are equally assured of their rights with dignity and respect, including access to food, shelter, employment, education and health in a sustainable manner.' Even in its first years, in the 1970s and 80s, the agency understood poverty to be rooted in the denial of basic rights, and that the fulfillment of people's livelihoods and other needs, was linked with an actualisation of their rights. Too, Oxfam International has defined poverty as "largely a state of powerlessness in which

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people are unable to exercise their basic human rights or control virtually any aspect of their lives."

In practice, Oxfam Hong Kong has always tended towards a relational rights approach, which emphasises the rights and responsibilities of individuals and institutions. This paradigm is manifested in the commitment to build up people's skills and capacities in virtually all of its programmes with more than 250 community organisations in Hong Kong and abroad, community development or an emergency, development education and advocacy. The rights-based approach further affirms this commitment against poverty and related injustice.



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