

Protecting Human Rights, Humanitarian, and Development Actors

This background document was developed to encourage discussions between human rights, humanitarian and development actors, on the issues of risk and protection. This document is intended to form the starting point for discussions at an interdisciplinary workshop, at the Centre for Applied Human Rights in May 2015.

In recent years, there has been increasing convergence between human rights, humanitarianism and development, as reflected in the growth of rights-based development and legal empowerment. With more human rights defenders (HRDs) now working on socio-economic rights and more development practitioners (who often do not self-identify as HRDs) engaged in rights-based approaches, there is an urgent need to create safe and enabling environments for these actors and those they serve. Nonetheless, HRDs and development actors still often work in separate “silos”, particularly when it comes to prevention and protection. As such, there are opportunities for human rights actors to learn from development actors’ approaches to protection, and vice versa.

Responses to the risks faced by HRDs are mostly reactive, focused on protection and emergency response (Petranov, 2011). In contrast, the work of development and humanitarian actors has placed more emphasis on reducing vulnerability and building the resilience of individuals and communities (though the main focus has been on protecting aid recipients rather than aid workers). This approach may encourage human rights actors to move towards more proactive prevention models and place a greater emphasis on the essential role communities play in protection. Humanitarian and development actors also conceptualise protection more broadly than the human rights community, viewing psycho-social wellbeing and material assistance (e.g. access to food and shelter) as strongly linked to physical protection (ActionAid, 2009; Trócaire, 2014). Current protection mechanisms for HRDs have been critiqued for not paying enough attention to the well-being of HRDs and the broader environments in which HRDs work (Petranov, 2011).

Insights from the humanitarian and development community have the potential to develop current discussions of ‘enabling environments’ and ‘integrated security’ by human rights actors (Barry & Nainar, 2008; Nah et al., 2013). ‘Enabling environments’ (prevention-oriented protection measures) are reflected in a range of current strategies used to protect HRDs, including: the building of commitment and institutions to promote human rights at the national level; the strengthening of the capacity and credibility of HRDs and; the development of networks and coalitions to support HRDs at risk. Similarly, a broader view of protection speaks to recent debates about ‘integrated security’, an understanding of security as holistic and concerned with the protection needs of both individuals and communities.

Yet, there is also the possibility that the growing recognition of HRDs has something to offer to development and humanitarian actors. Many development activities not conceptualised as ‘rights-based’ nevertheless intersect with human rights issues. For example, issues surrounding food and hunger link to, among other things, the right to food. As a consequence, grassroots development actors (who may be making claims on the state, disputing access to natural or economic resources, or working to secure entitlements) can often be conceptualised as being at the ‘front line’ of human rights: as being human rights defenders.

While often overlooked in the development community, there has been growing recognition of the significance of HRDs as agents of change, who often work in difficult or dangerous environments to secure access to the civil, political, economic and cultural resources that have been guaranteed as human rights in international law. As a result, states have developed a number of international, regional and national mechanisms for the protection of HRDs. Potential exists for these tools and insights to be capitalised on by development actors. Reports by the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, as well as NGOs such as Global Witness, have drawn attention to the particular risks faced by HRDs working on land rights, natural resources and environmental issues, and those campaigning against illegal or forced evictions (Global Witness, 2013; UN, 2013). This risk is seen as linked to the fact that the work of HRDs in these areas is particularly stigmatized and delegitimized by state and non-state actors. For instance, HRDs opposing large-scale development projects are often viewed as anti-development rather than engaging in legitimate attempts to defend the rights of those affected by development projects and policies (UN, 2013).

In this light, the central question for the workshop is: what lessons, synergies or tensions emerge by considering development, humanitarian and human rights actors' approaches to protection?

Workshop participants may want to consider the following questions:

- What lessons can be drawn across fields from different understandings of, and strategies for, risk and protection?
- How may working across fields help us to face common issues of concern, such as the repression of NGOs, or the need to build 'enabling environments' for HRDs?
- What, if anything, could be gained by understanding development actors as human rights defenders?
- When do development actors choose to claim or reject the HRD label and how does this impact on their vulnerability?

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