Towards a Theory of Change:
Human Rights and Development in the New Millennium

COST ACTION IS 0702: The Role of the EU in UN Human Rights Reform

Working Group II on Human Rights and Development Tools

AHRI members of COST Action IS 0702 on the role of the EU in UN Human Rights reform have established since 2009 a specific Working Group II of researchers focused on the sub-topic of human rights and development tools, including a particular focus on EU and UN institutions.

The major output of this work is an edited volume: *Towards a Theory of Change: Human Rights and Development in the New Millennium* (Routledge, 2013).

In addition to this, the team has prepared *a series of policy briefs* to help translate the research findings into concrete recommendations for European, UN and other development policy makers.

The added-value of this research is that it employs a *theory of change framework* in the analysis of how human rights inform development work at local, national and international levels. The contributions ask how the expansion of human rights into development work affects *organisational and operational change* and investigates the role of different actors in bringing about change.

The Working Group believes this research can inform key EU and UN policy instruments such as the EU Agenda for Change, the EU Strategic Framework and Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy, and the UN Development Group's Human Rights Mainstreaming Mechanism.

What Change Are We Trying To Achieve?
Theories of Change in Human Rights and Development

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Few human rights or development agencies work with an explicit theory of change. It is much more common for agencies to have an implicit, partially formed theory of change. The objective of this research project is to explore what might be gained by bringing these implicit, partially formed theories of change to light. It addresses two core questions: What is gained by making theories of change explicit rather than implicit? And, what are the similarities and differences between human rights and development theories of change, and why is such an analysis useful? The potential advantage of rendering a theory of change explicit is that it provides a vantage point from which all aspects of organisational activity can be viewed, coordinated and, if necessary, reformed.

A theory of change links a goal or concept ('the theory') and the mechanisms or methodologies that are designed to deliver on the promise of the goal or concept ('the change'). It encapsulates 'our perceptions, assumptions or beliefs about the process or pathway through which social change can or will' be achieved. Outward looking theories seek to understand the way in which change occurs through policies, programmes, projects, campaigns and other operational activities. Inward looking theories of change refer to the internal dynamics and priorities of organisations, and how they change over time and in relation to shifts in operational focus, external pressures, and so on. The book examines mainly outward looking or operational theories of change.

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The project compares human rights and development theories of change for a number of reasons. Theories of change in development are more advanced, originating in the literature on monitoring and evaluation. In human rights, theories of change are virtually non-existent. Will human rights feel the need to articulate theories of change? If so, will organisations simply borrow from neighbours such as development organisations or generate their own theories of change? Whatever transferable lessons there may be one would also expect differences between the two fields to be reflected in their theories of change, despite recent convergence brought about by more serious work on economic and social rights, human rights-based approaches to development, and related developments. Development work is essentially evidence based, for example, whereas human rights activism is more usually governed by laws and norms (as such human rights theories of change often start from laws and work backwards). Development actors often work in partnership with governments, and in some cases will work with governments which human rights agencies regard as oppressive. Such differences will surely inform theories of change.

Five entry-points to theories of change are addressed: 1) The state. 2) The law. 3) Transnational and international collaboration. 4) Localism and bottom-up approaches. 5) Multiple and complex methods. Brief consideration is also given to inward looking or organisational theories of change for human rights and development organisations.

Three important issues will be addressed in this discussion about **the state** and theories of change. 1) The role of the state with regard to change. 2) Optimal relations between various actors – other states, inter-governmental organizations (IGOs), NGOs, etc. – and a given state. 3) Links between roles and relationships, and how relationships can modify roles e.g. should NGOs only deliver services when also building the capacity of the state to assume its responsibilities?

Two key tensions between development and human rights theories of change are identified. First, with reference to the role of the state, is whether there is a development-human rights trade off, especially at the early stages of development. Second, while human rights organisations often have an adversarial relationship with governments, development actors, in part because they are much more dependent on governments as donors and in part because of the less politically contentious nature of their work, more usually work in partnership with governments.

There are basically two views on the role of **law** in social change. In one view, the law leads, i.e. it may trigger, facilitate or speed up change; in the opposite view, law follows change, i.e. it legally codifies and thus consolidates the change that has taken place. Under the former view, the law is considered proactive, under the latter reactive.

While it may be premature to draw any firm conclusions, it is clear that human rights law, more than any other branch of the law, is seen as a potential leverage for change. That potential has been explored in particular in litigation, with important recent work being done on this issue. Empirically, it has become clear that the effectiveness of litigation in bringing about change needs to be contextualized, qualified and linked to broader policy provisions. Only when certain conditions are met, may human rights litigation have the direct and indirect impacts sought.

Two main models for **transnational and international cooperation** are explored, and their link to theories of change: 1) North-South partnerships, which continue to characterise much development work. 2) Transnational advocacy networks, which are an important point of reference in the human rights literature. The latter literature relates to theories of change in that it seeks to understand changes in state compliance with international norms, and suggest processes or pathways through which actors such as NGOs and IGOs can help facilitate this goal.

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By identifying methods beyond the purely adversarial, the transnational advocacy literature helps to build bridges between human rights and related fields such as development. In contrast the North-South partnership theory of change takes neither the state nor international norms as its point of departure, but rather tries to empower and build the capacity of local actors in the belief that this will enable change to be locally owned, legitimate and sustainable.

If transnational and international collaboration can be critiqued for being a top-down theory of change, more locally driven, **bottom-up alternatives** do exist. The main development modality that focuses on local context, power and politics prioritises participation, empowerment and citizenship, while an actor-oriented perspective serves a similar function within human rights. Perhaps the main area of tension between development and human rights in this context is the relative priority to be given to process versus outcomes criteria. Localism and bottom-up approaches champion not just a particular direction of change but also particular ways of working that may take precedence over pre-conceived outcomes (such as the contents of national legislation or international treaties).

Much of the above discussion indicates the importance of **multiple and complex methods** in both development and human rights. Such methods are in part a function of history – and history depositing a layered archaeology from past political eras, priorities and cycles of donor funding. But it is also an active choice in the present, and a statement that complex problems require complex interventions and solutions. This theory has implications for the skills required to undertake development and human rights work, the strategies employed, and more. But as noted in the introduction it raises difficult questions about prioritization, sequencing, the relationship between different kinds of intervention, and appropriate divisions of labour between various actors or professional sectors.

Both development and human rights are characterised by diverse theories of change, and intersections between the two fields are adding to their number. The five entry-points to theories of change outlined above are not mutually exclusive – local struggles against oppression can resonate though transnational and international networks, for example – and indeed may be more powerful in combination - but neither can they all be embraced without contradiction. Some are focused and narrowly construed, others are more ambitious and wide-ranging.

The theories raise questions about appropriate divisions of labour and relationships between the state and other actors; the role of law in bringing about broad-based social and policy change; the formation of optimal change alliances and networks; choices to be made with regard to top-down versus bottom-up as well as process- versus outcome-led approaches; and how organisations and sectors should prepare for a world requiring multiple and complex skill sets. Broader meta-questions relate to the desirability of the growing overlap in philosophy and methodology in the social justice sector (often driven by human rights), and its implications for organisational identity and profile.

Theories relating to **organisational change** (inward looking theories of change) can be applied to both human rights and development organisations. Four such theories are outlined: 1) Organisational change due to changes in the external environment. 2) Organisational change as a result of cycles of internal reflection and planning. 3) Change as organisations take on new issues and approaches. 4) Change as organisations take on new leadership, or leaders adopt new priorities.

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Policy recommendations:

- Organisations should consider adopting an explicit theory of change, as such a theory encourages agencies to think about issues such as causation, influence and actors, and to link theory, and broader strategic thinking and planning, to practice.

- It remains true that development work is more evidence based, preventive, pragmatic, non-confrontational, while human rights work is still largely driven by norms, reactive, principled and more adversarial. Implicit in each of these binaries is an assumption about how change is best achieved. But it is clear that these differences are less absolute than they once were.

- Implicit theories of change in human rights and development focus on broadly similar challenges: who to work with, how to legitimise the activities undertaken, the level of ambition, how to prioritise, etc.

- Convergence through, for example, human rights-based approaches to development sheds further light on these similarities and differences, e.g. rights principles such as participation and non-discrimination are used in development with often little or no reference to international human rights law, and with an emphasis on the shift from needs to entitlements, a distilled essence of rights (principles), and building the capacities of duty bearers (the state) as well as rights holders. In short, the encounter between human rights and development produces something new, that is neither conventional human rights nor conventional development and that suggests new theories of change.

- The comparison is useful because it highlights very different visions of the world and how to bring about change. It also suggests ways in which one field can learn from another, and raises questions about whether greater consensus about theories of change is desirable or not. Are sectors stronger when there is convergence on such issues or when diversity and disagreement prevails?

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