Quick Guide to Rights-Based Approaches to Development

Oxfam aims to take a rights-based approach to its development, humanitarian and campaign work. Taking a rights-based approach to development is a way of thinking about, designing and managing development programmes that is guided by the legal standards found in the range of international human rights treaties and conventions, and the values and principles that inform them.

What are human rights?
Human rights are universal legal entitlements that represent the minimum standards essential for human dignity, often divided into the broad categories of Civil, Political, Economic, Social and Cultural rights. All people are rights-holders, and human rights apply to all people equally, regardless of sex, politics, colour, race, ethnic origin, nationality, sexual orientation, religion, economic or social class, or any other distinction. Duty-bearers have an obligation to respect, protect and fulfil human rights. States are the principle duty-bearers, but all rights entail corresponding responsibilities, and people are often both rights-holders and duty-bearers.

Why does Oxfam take a rights-based approach to development?

- Oxfam believes that all human lives are of equal value, and that everyone has fundamental rights that must be recognized and upheld at all times;
- Oxfam respects people living in poverty as agents of their own development (not passive recipients of aid or objects of charity). Taking a rights-based approach to our work reflects our belief that with the right resources, support and training, people living in poverty can solve their own problems;
- Taking a rights-based approach to our work reflects Oxfam’s belief that development work needs to go beyond issues of material resources to consider and address the capacity, choices and power required for people living in poverty to enjoy all human rights.

What are the key elements of a rights-based approach, or RBA?

Rights-based development work...
- Recognises that imbalances in power relations contribute to marginalisation and prevent poor people from exercising their rights;
- Is participatory, recognising that all people, including those living in poverty, have a right to be involved in processes that impact on their lives;
- Recognises that all development actors and all stakeholders are accountable to one another;
- Promotes equality and non-discrimination, with a particular focus on vulnerable or marginalised people(s);
- Is holistic - recognising that economic poverty has deeply felt social, cultural and political causes and effects, and that the spectrum of human rights must be understood together to constitute the basic necessities for a life of dignity and freedom;
- Recognises that rights also involve corresponding responsibilities – the fact that we all have human rights means we are also all duty bearers;
- Makes use of existing legal systems, and, depending on the context, develop links between development goals and international human rights laws.
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What does working with RBA mean for development programmes?
RBA shape what development programmes work on by encouraging strong links between development goals and human rights standards. Working with RBA means that we are acknowledging that poverty is a denial of basic human rights, and that all development work should aim at the universal realisation of human rights.

RBA shape how development programmes work to achieve these goals by making the personal experience of people living in poverty a priority. RBA encourages development practitioners to show respect for people living in poverty by working in ways that enable them to be agents in their own development. This means promoting values of equality, justice, and freedom and incorporating principles of participation, accountability, and non-discrimination at every stage of the programme cycle.

How can we use rights-based approaches in development work?
At a minimum, taking a rights-based approach to development will involve using human rights principles of participation, accountability and non-discrimination to guide and influence the choices that are made at every stage of the programme cycle, with the explicit goal of enabling people to realise their human rights. However, the problems faced by people living in poverty and the solutions that will work for them will be different in every context. As a result, rights-based programmes will develop differently, and it is important that we do not try to set out a rigid idea of how rights-based development should look in practice. Here are just a few ideas to help you think critically about how you can take a more rights-based approach to your programming:

- Make use of existing national and international human rights laws to add weight to demands for equality by people living in poverty
- Disaggregate information about the people you are working with. This will help identify the most vulnerable or marginalized, as well as the forces that cause or perpetuate this situation
- Be participatory, don’t just ‘do’ participation. Promote the inclusion of all stakeholders in every phase of the programme cycle, from design and implementation, to monitoring and evaluation
- Identify and prioritise the issues that the programme/project will address according to the concerns of the poor themselves
- Support people living in poverty to shape their own reality, to make choices and to participate meaningfully as citizens in the decisions that impact on their lives
- Design projects or programmes that will help to challenge and change unequal power relations
- Be accountable to the people you work with - e.g. involve them in programme choices, be transparent about decision-making processes, ensure information on the programme (activities, budgets, what has been achieved etc.) is available and easy to understand
- Be aware that discrimination has many layers. Inequities (such as gender) often exist within vulnerable or marginalized groups

Resources and further reading
CRIN: Key Publications on Human Rights-Based Approaches: www.crin.org/hrbp/