

Development as a human right

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VIEW



SYED MOHAMMAD ALI

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Defining development as an undeniable human right is useful since it infuses an otherwise malleable notion of development with a sense of ethical responsibility. A rights approach to development categorically recognises the importance of providing individuals access to socio-economic opportunities and to safeguard them from violence and prejudices. The linkage between human rights and development is not merely conceptual, it is expressly endorsed by several United Nations declarations and covenants. The UN Declaration on the Right to Development justifies even the need for a universal entitlement to a social and international order in which the human right to development can be fully realised. Thus, the responsibility of ensuring this right is not shouldered by states alone, instead it is a collective responsibility of the entire international community.

While there is no universally agreed upon rights approach to development, a consensus does exist on some of its basic elements. Various UN agencies, national institutions and non-governmental organisations are implementing the human rights agenda within the development sector. Organisations like the International Labour Organisation have identified creative ways to pursue this approach to development by recommending that producers be granted increased access to markets in lieu of paying more attention to workers' rights. A rights perspective allows integration of the norms, standards and principles of the international human rights framework into plans, policies and processes of development initiatives. As a result, concerns for equality and accountability, or for empowerment and participation can readily become operational imperatives in development efforts within sectors as diverse as health, education, housing, and political participation.

Moreover, international obligations and national commitments to the right to development have lent weight to demands of global campaigners like Oxfam that developed countries should 'make trade fair' to reduce global poverty. There is also a tangible base of reference for local and international pressure groups to raise an alarm when efforts to achieve economic and

social rights are compromised by conflicting interests, as often occurs when military expenditures rise at the cost of public spending. However, both states and the international community must do more to assure the right to development is realised in practice. In addition to greater political will, states around the world need to undertake further legislative reforms and firmly put in place administrative and institutional mechanisms which are responsive to ground realities. More effective international cooperation is also needed to address resource shortages in developing countries and to lend technical support, particularly in translating universal standards into locally determined benchmarks for measuring progress and enhancing accountability.

While sectoral development approaches tend to focus exclusively on selected indicators to measure performance, the human rights framework allows a deep cognisance of issues underlying conditions of underdevelopment. Consider, for example, the problem of poverty. Economically determined poverty analyses will base their judgments predominantly on income-based indicators. Applying a human rights approach to the same problem reveals other issues of relevance to poverty, such as the phenomena of powerlessness or social exclusion, in turn offering a more meaningful approach to tackle poverty.

The rights approach to development decreases reliance on controversial development models, partisan approaches or ad hoc policies. There is no shortage of harm caused by development agreements, projects and activities that have remained indifferent to human rights concerns. Economic models like structural adjustment, for example, are said to have increased inequality instead of alleviating it, due to a myopic focus on macroeconomic stabilisation rather than directly focusing on the rights of those directly suffering the consequences of poverty. Rights approaches have further influenced adoption of measures to mitigate undesirable side effects of development. The practice of undertaking social or environmental impact assessments, which has become a standard practice prior to commencing infrastructure development, is compelled by the need

to protect rights of affected communities.

However, human rights are not always mutually reinforcing. Sometimes the exercise of individual rights can cause serious conflicts; the economic right to profit has enabled trans-national companies to expand to an extent that threatens food security in developing countries. Nobel laureate Amartya Sen remains averse to adopting a purely legalistic or growth-based approach to human rights. From an ethical standpoint, Sen considers economic rights less important than personal rights. After all, what moral argument could place the right to profit at the same level of priority as provision of food?

Pakistan would do well in paying heed to Sen's advice given the prevailing condition of human rights in the country. Besides constitutional guarantees, the Pakistan government has ratified and signed major international covenants including the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women. Yet, the state has not even curbed its own repressive tendencies to protect vested interests. Only recently the Human Rights Watch has launched a scathing attack against the current regime, for coercing farmers in Okara district of the Punjab to sign contracts that would cede their land rights. None of the recent governments in the country has done enough to protect rights of minorities, to curb sectarian violence or even prevent honour killings.

Official efforts have clearly been unable to address the glaring deprivation plaguing the lives of common people in Pakistan. Being a declared nuclear power despite the fact that a majority of the people are denied access to sanitation and clean drinking water, is enough of an indication of our national priorities. Clearly, Pakistan has a long way to go in terms of ensuring that its citizenry possesses the right to development. One hopes that a square recognition of this fact will garner greater attention to the unfulfilled responsibility.

The writer is a researcher with diverse experience in the development sector. He can be reached at syedmo-hdali555@yahoo.com

HUMAN POTENTIAL NEEDS TO BE NURTURED. All people require opportunities and safeguards in order to achieve a decent standard of life. Besides providing the rationale for a plethora of policies and programmes formulated to address specific needs, this imperative of creating an enabling environment for human beings can be viewed in a rights- context.