

# The Human Rights Based Approach to Development Cooperation: Towards a Common Understanding Among UN Agencies

The UN Statement of Common Understanding on Human Rights-Based Approaches to Development Cooperation and Programming (the Common Understanding) was adopted by the United Nations Development Group (UNDG) in 2003. The purpose behind developing a common understanding was to ensure that UN agencies, funds and programmes apply a consistent Human Rights-Based Approach to common programming processes at global and regional levels, and especially at the country level in relation to the CCA and UNDAF.

## Introduction

The United Nations is founded on the principles of peace, justice, freedom and human rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognizes human rights as the foundation of freedom, justice and peace. The unanimously adopted Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action states that democracy, development, and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms are interdependent and mutually reinforcing.

In the UN Programme for Reform that was launched in 1997, the Secretary-General called on all entities of the UN system to mainstream human rights into their various activities and programmes within the framework of their respective mandates.

Since then a number of UN agencies have adopted a human rights-based approach to their development cooperation and have gained experiences in its operationalization. But each agency has tended to have its own interpretation of approach and how it should be operationalized. However, UN interagency collaboration at global and regional levels, and especially at the country level in relation to the CCA and UNDAF processes, requires a common understanding of this approach and its implications for development programming. What follows is an attempt to arrive at such an understanding on the basis of those aspects of the human rights-based approach that are common to the policy and practice of the UN bodies that participated in the Interagency Workshop on a Human Rights based Approach in the context of UN reform 3-5 May, 2003.

This Statement of Common Understanding specifically refers to a human rights based approach to the development cooperation and development programming by UN agencies.

## The Common Understanding

- All programmes of development co-operation, policies and technical assistance should further the realisation of human rights as laid down in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights instruments.
- Human rights standards contained in, and principles derived from, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights instruments guide all development cooperation and programming in all sectors and in all phases of the programming process.
- Development cooperation contributes to the development of the capacities of 'duty-bearers' to meet their obligations and/or of 'rights-holders' to claim their rights.

**1. All programmes of development co-operation, policies and technical assistance should further the realisation of human rights as laid down in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights instruments.**

A set of programme activities that only incidentally contributes to the realization of human rights does not necessarily constitute a human rights-based approach to programming. In a human

rights-based approach to programming and development cooperation, the aim of all activities is to contribute directly to the realization of one or several human rights.

## 2. Human rights standards contained in, and principles derived from, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights instruments guide all development cooperation and programming in all sectors and in all phases of the programming process.

Human Rights principles guide programming in all sectors, such as: health, education, governance, nutrition, water and sanitation, HIV/AIDS, employment and labour relations and social and economic security. This includes all development cooperation directed towards the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and the Millennium Declaration. Consequently, human rights standards and principles guide both the Common Country Assessment and the UN Development Assistance Framework.

Human rights principles guide all programming in all phases of the programming process, including assessment and analysis, programme planning and design (including setting of goals, objectives and strategies); implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

Among these human rights principles are: universality and inalienability; indivisibility; inter-dependence and inter-relatedness; non-discrimination and equality; participation and inclusion; accountability and the rule of law. These principles are explained below.

- **Universality and inalienability:** Human rights are universal and inalienable. All people everywhere in the world are entitled to them. The human person in whom they inhere cannot voluntarily give them up. Nor can others take them away from him or her. As stated in Article 1 of the UDHR, "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights".
- **Indivisibility:** Human rights are indivisible. Whether of a civil, cultural, economic, political or social nature, they are all inherent to the dignity of every human person. Consequently, they all have equal status as rights, and cannot be ranked, a priori, in a hierarchical order.
- **Inter-dependence and Inter-relatedness.** The realization of one right often depends, wholly or in part, upon the realization of others. For instance, realization of the right to health may depend, in certain circumstances, on realization of the right to education or of the right to information.
- **Equality and Non-discrimination:** All individuals are equal as human beings and by virtue of the inherent dignity of each human person. All human beings are entitled to their human rights without discrimination of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, ethnicity, age, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, disability, property, birth or other status as explained by the human rights treaty bodies.
- **Participation and Inclusion:** Every person and all peoples are entitled to active, free and meaningful participation in, contribution to, and enjoyment of civil, economic, social, cultural and political development in which human rights and fundamental freedoms can be realized.
- **Accountability and Rule of Law:** States and other duty-bearers are answerable for the observance of human rights. In this regard, they have to comply with the legal norms and standards enshrined in human rights instruments. Where they fail to do so, aggrieved rights-holders are entitled to institute proceedings for appropriate redress before a competent court or other adjudicator in accordance with the rules and procedures provided by law.

## 3. Programmes of development cooperation contribute to the development of the capacities of duty-bearers to meet their obligations and of 'rights-holders' to claim their rights.

In a HRBA human rights determine the relationship between individuals and groups with valid claims (rights-holders) and State and non-state actors with correlative obligations (duty-bearers). It identifies rights-holders (and their entitlements) and corresponding duty-bearers (and their obligations) and works towards strengthening the capacities of rights-holders to make their claims, and of duty-bearers to meet their obligations.

## Implications of A Human Rights Based Approach to Development Programming of UN Agencies

Experience has shown that the use of a human rights-based approach requires the use of good programming practices. However, the application of “good programming practices” does not by itself constitute a human rights-based approach, and requires additional elements.

The following elements are necessary, specific, and unique to a human rights-based approach:

- Assessment and analysis in order to identify the human rights claims of rights-holders and the corresponding human rights obligations of duty-bearers as well as the immediate, underlying, and structural causes of the non-realization of rights.
- Programmes assess the capacity of rights-holders to claim their rights, and of duty-bearers to fulfill their obligations. They then develop strategies to build these capacities.
- Programmes monitor and evaluate both outcomes and processes guided by human rights standards and principles.
- Programming is informed by the recommendations of international human rights bodies and mechanisms.

Other elements of good programming practices that are also essential under a HRBA, include:

- People are recognized as key actors in their own development, rather than passive recipients of commodities and services.
- Participation is both a means and a goal.
- Strategies are empowering, not disempowering.
- Both outcomes and processes are monitored and evaluated.
- Analysis includes all stakeholders.
- Programmes focus on marginalized, disadvantaged, and excluded groups.
- The development process is locally owned.
- Programmes aim to reduce disparity.
- Both top-down and bottom-up approaches are used in synergy.
- Situation analysis is used to identify immediate, underlying, and basic causes of development problems.
- Measurable goals and targets are important in programming.
- Strategic partnerships are developed and sustained.

Programmes support accountability to all stakeholders