
Policy and Practice Note

Collective Critical Reflections on Using a Human Rights-Based Approach in ActionAid

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Abstract

ActionAid first made a commitment to move to a human rights-based approach (HRBA) to development in 1998, through its strategy ‘Fighting Poverty Together’—and this has been reinforced in subsequent strategies, ‘Rights to End Poverty’ in 2005 and ‘People’s Action to End Poverty’ 2011. (A policy and practice note that tracked the participatory process used in developing the 2011 strategy was published in the November 2011 issue of the *Journal of Human Rights Practice*.) In 2015 a series of regional meetings were held convening programme staff and partners to share practical experiences of applying HRBA in different contexts. Participants presented and collectively scrutinized country case studies drawing out critical learning about ActionAid’s theory of change and HRBA. These insights were then synthesized and collated across regions. This policy and practice note presents the key reflections for the next stage of evolution in ActionAid’s human rights-based approach, showing how they have helped to inform the new ActionAid ‘Strategy 2028: Action for Global Justice’.

Keywords: development; human rights-based approach; learning; NGO; power; strategy

1. Understanding ActionAid’s human rights-based approach

ActionAid’s theory of change is built around four pillars: empowerment, solidarity, campaigning and rights-based alternatives. It is most concisely captured in the single sentence:

We believe that an end to poverty and injustice can be achieved through purposeful individual and collective action, led by the active agency of people living in poverty and supported by solidarity, credible rights-based alternatives and campaigns that address the structural causes and consequences of poverty.

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In terms of empowerment (that is, purposeful individual and collective action, led by the active agency of people living in poverty) ActionAid prioritizes ‘conscientization’—building the critical awareness of people living in poverty through a reflection–action process that draws on ActionAid’s rich experience with participatory methods. But empowerment also involves supporting and strengthening people’s organizations and social movements; monitoring public policies and budgets to hold governments to account; harnessing the power of communications to raise people’s voices through different media; and responding to urgent needs through rights-based service delivery.

In the area of solidarity, ActionAid links people across the global North and global South through fundraising and campaigns; it also builds solidarity by linking different struggles across issues and across countries and builds wider alliances in support of the collective struggles of people living in poverty.

The area of campaigning (to address the structural causes and consequences of poverty) involves building evidence and research from our long-term work on local rights to inform lobbying, advocacy and mass mobilization. Major multi-country campaigns in the present period include the Tax Power campaign (arguing for progressive tax that is progressively spent), the LandFor campaign (that challenges land grabs and defends women’s right to land) and Safe Cities (which campaigns for attitudinal change and public sector reforms to reduce violence against women in urban areas). In each case strategic coalitions and alliances are built with other actors to advance the campaigns.

Working on credible rights-based alternatives involves moving beyond fighting against poverty to actively fighting for positive solutions. In different areas of its work ActionAid advances frameworks and approaches that challenge the dominant paradigms of the development sector, building practice and evidence that there are alternatives. Examples of this include: proposing a positive vision of gender responsive public services; promoting rights-based citizens’ reports; developing a model of climate-resilient sustainable agriculture; and advancing models of customary and communal land ownership that respect women’s rights.

The most systematic articulation of ActionAid’s human rights-based approach (HRBA) is collected in the reference book ‘People’s Action in Practice’ (ActionAid 2012). This spells out **eight core principles**:

1. We put people living in poverty first and enable their active agency as rights activists.
2. We analyse and confront unequal power.
3. We advance women’s rights.
4. We work in partnership.
5. We are accountable and transparent.
6. We rigorously monitor and evaluate to evidence our impact and we critically reflect and learn to improve our work.
7. We ensure links across levels—local, national, regional and international—to ensure we are addressing structural causes of poverty.
8. We are innovative, solutions-oriented and promote credible alternatives.

Through 2015 a series of regional meetings were held: in Lilongwe (for East and Southern Africa), Abuja (for West and Horn of Africa) and Bangkok (for Asia), convening over 100 people, including ActionAid’s Heads of Programmes and frontline staff and partners from local rights-based programmes. Each meeting was structured entirely around country case studies presenting experiences of applying ActionAid’s HRBA in practice in

different contexts. After each presentation peers would interrogate the experience, to identify what best illustrated or reinforced ActionAid's HRBA, what challenged or undermined it and what raised new dimensions for the future. In total this collective process scrutinized 16 detailed country case studies and 15 shorter case studies, in each case drawing out critical learning about ActionAid's theory of change and HRBA. This policy and practice note presents a synthesis of the insights gained and shows how these have informed the future strategic directions of the ActionAid federation.

The following detailed case studies were analysed:

Tanzania: challenging a major land grab in Bagaymoyo

Malawi: promoting rights in schools and developing a citizens' report

Kenya: mobilizing the Kilifi county citizens forum

Uganda: challenging corruption—from local democracy to the black Monday movement

Mozambique: linking tax justice and the financing of the right to education

Somaliland: using HRBA in the context of an absent state

Nigeria: building a movement of small scale women farmers

Ghana: challenging unpaid care work

Ethiopia: ending discrimination and developing Women's Watch Groups

Liberia: implementing HRBA in the Ebola response

India: supporting the land rights struggles in Andhra Pradesh

Nepal: linking local and national action on land rights

Palestine: using HRBA in an occupied territory

Bangladesh: strengthening people's movements on the coastal embankments

Myanmar: democratizing planning through the village book

Cambodia: building a safe city coalition to advance women's rights

Shorter case studies were also analysed from South Africa, Lesotho, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Rwanda, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), The Gambia, Senegal, Haiti, Viet Nam, Thailand, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Australia and Nicaragua.

2. Applying HRBA in diverse contexts

ActionAid's practical experiences of using HRBA included examples from very diverse and difficult contexts—including in the absence of a credible state in Somaliland, in weak states such as Cambodia and stronger states like India, in constrained political contexts such as Ethiopia or The Gambia, in post-conflict countries like Sierra Leone, in one-party States like Viet Nam, in the occupied territory of Palestine and in the challenging environment of Liberia under Ebola. Perhaps the most fundamental conclusion of the analysis was that HRBA is valid in all these contexts (whether in strong, weak, fragile, absent or occupied states or under revolutionary, progressive or oppressive governments). However, challenges arise when people try to treat HRBA as a blueprint, template or magic bullet—as if there is only one unchangeable way of working. Such tendencies can lead to claims from staff or partners that 'HRBA doesn't work here' or 'HRBA is too dangerous' (for example in repressive states) rather than seeking to adapt the approach to the context.

The solution is to avoid fetishizing ActionAid's HRBA—as if the elements of ActionAid's theory of change woven together have some magical powers. Whilst the principles and legal obligations embedded in human rights are constant, the strategies and tactics used to promote them must always be contextualized, creatively adapting core elements of the theory of change to ensure a community-owned and people-led process. There are no

permanently ideal contexts for using HRBA and no impossible contexts. In each context it is about identifying which aspects or strategies of implementation to focus on, and what entry points or language to use—without compromising on the eight basic principles outlined above. There are particular challenges about better articulating HRBA and the tactics that may be used for contexts where the government is absent or weak—but HRBA is not always about confronting the state: it is still possible to focus on building people's collective power and strengthening the accountability of whatever forms of power or levels of government authority are operational, to lay the foundations for the future.

Another key observation that emerged was that human rights-based struggles are becoming more challenging in the context of rising inequality and injustice and increasing corporate power. The powerful in this world are getting more powerful and forceful in their wielding of power and so ActionAid needs to respond more quickly and effectively. There is a clear need to address the reality of growing corporate power and associated rises in inequality—an area where ActionAid's HRBA will need further development. Many governments are held to account more by corporates than their own citizens—which undermines HRBA (as it is states, not corporates, who sign up to international human rights standards) and often breeds corruption. ActionAid needs to better understand how to hold corporates to account and how to work towards transforming unequal power relations, for example shifting power away from unaccountable corporates and towards stronger and more accountable governments. Elections can be pivotal moments and opportunities for bringing about change and more work is needed to better understand how to deal with political parties and election processes, without becoming partisan or losing the licence to operate in a particular country.

One major concern that was flagged was the increasing challenges in using HRBA that arise from shrinking political space. This can occur under apparently democratic or authoritarian governments (whether in Uganda, The Gambia, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe or India) with the introduction of new laws, policies or practices that seek to regulate or control the work of civil society, clamp down on dissent, limit the freedom of speech and block the space to organize or mobilize. Participants observed that these restrictions seem to be often linked to rising inequality—as political and economic elites wish to protect their interests and curtail attempts to challenge the dominant paradigm or to offer alternatives. The challenge of shrinking political space needs a coordinated, united response across different organizations and different sectors. It also requires ActionAid to be creative in how it works and in the language that is used to describe work—but it was universally agreed that these constraints should never prevent ActionAid from pursuing HRBA.

There were internal issues that were highlighted regarding how ActionAid uses risk analysis frameworks and risk management systems. These are sometimes structured in such a way that makes people risk averse rather than willing to actively take (informed or calculated) risks based on courage of conviction. The use of HRBA inevitably creates some risk (compared, for example, to taking a purely charitable approach to responding to needs), especially for front-line workers, local partners, community activists and human rights defenders who daily confront powerful elites (who are reluctant to cede power). It is important to comprehensively track these risks at all levels and to be serious about putting in place mitigating actions—but awareness of the risks should never prevent bold action to defend people's rights. Risk analysis must never lead to paralysis.

3. Deepening power analysis

A recurrent theme in the critical discussions was that power analysis and challenging power, particularly hidden and invisible power, should be placed much more centrally in ActionAid's HRBA and theory of change. The existing HRBA resource materials within ActionAid do not elaborate enough about challenging hidden power (for example the power of large corporations or international financial institutions) or invisible power (for example power arising from patriarchal values and traditional cultural beliefs). Across the organization there is a tendency to focus on the more visible 'public sphere' (of rights) and duty bearers, rather than the private/personal spaces (despite ActionAid's focus on women's rights). There was consensus about needing to build deeper understanding, guidance and tactics on how to analyse, understand and challenge different types of power and how to ensure diverse dimensions of power are addressed (military, political, religious, ethnic, patriarchal, traditional, cultural, corporate, institutional power and so on). A related observation was the need to analyse more systematically the multiple discriminations people face (based on gender, caste, identity, income status and so on). Unequal power is a structural cause of poverty but it is different in every context and it is constantly shifting, never static—so it is important to keep tracking and understanding the shifts.

The bulk of ActionAid's work is in long-term 'local rights programmes', engaging in communities with people living in poverty and facing exclusion. There was a strong call for everyone to avoid romanticizing 'communities'—assuming they are homogenous, when in fact every community is heterogeneous, with multiple power dynamics and divisions. There are hidden and invisible power dynamics within families and local communities, and often it is within these micro spaces where the most deeply rooted and internalized oppression operates. This is often the most difficult form of power to change (not least because it is hard to hold hidden and invisible power-holders to account), and to succeed depends on sustained processes of conscientization. It is about people changing their position in society, their values and their sense of themselves—and it takes time. It is also important to recognize that sometimes ActionAid staff and partners hold some of the very negative values and beliefs which violate others' rights. It becomes even more challenging to engage communities in discussions or push for change when some of those facilitating the process do not believe that there should be change. As such, NGOs like ActionAid need to continually reflect on and transform their own power, including reviewing staffing and partner profiles, decision-making and resource allocation processes, and being aware of dominant ethnic, gender and other identities.

In many of the case studies there were strong examples of backlash from people in power—including in the extreme case from the President's office in Tanzania, which threatened to de-register ActionAid when there was a campaign in Bagamoyo opposing a land grab. There was equally powerful resistance from corporates to ActionAid's tax justice work in Zambia, and in the case of Nepal opposition to ActionAid's prioritization of work with Dalits. This led to the broad recognition that power never gives up without a struggle. Serious change will trigger a backlash. It is important to be prepared—but equally important that fear of a backlash should not prevent action. In these cases front-line workers can be harassed, threatened or arrested—and this can make some staff and partners nervous about proceeding. The key is to strengthen community-based protection mechanisms, planning how to deal with the backlash as part of a continual process of risk analysis—that is, early alert, rapid reaction, solidarity and collective response schemes to protect and support

staff and partners, to support activists and human rights defenders, and to support women who speak up in public and may face a backlash in private. In fact, backlash by those who hold power over others is almost inevitable and it can even be an indicator that you are doing something right—but you need to deeply understand and prepare for backlash. In a similar spirit, if everyone is happy you should ask yourself if you have really challenged or shifted power. When you challenge power someone whose privilege is challenged will be uncomfortable or unhappy.

The recognition about backlash led to further analysis—that change is not linear and that traditional monitoring and evaluation systems are not well tuned to track complex shifts in power—which are often not easy to measure. There were serious concerns raised that ActionAid’s monitoring and evaluation at global level had become too simplistic, focused on numbers and based on aggregating results rather than understanding and tracking complex and qualitative changes in people’s lives. Change does not follow a strict sequence of steps and it is often very messy—and shifts in power do not follow a simple pathway or predetermined project framework. There are further complications that arise when you are working in alliances and coalitions—when it is difficult to define your contribution. More work is needed to ensure a monitoring and evaluation approach and system that is fully aligned to using HRBA. First is the importance of better defining what is meant by change from an HRBA perspective and then getting better at describing and measuring shifts in power at all levels—including of invisible and hidden power. This is now the major priority in the overhauling of ActionAid’s approach to monitoring and evaluation. A related challenge is the need to get better at documenting and communicating work—which can sometimes be overly dominated by the need to satisfy supporter or donor expectations. This leads either to simplistic ‘stories about Nana’ (the individual child whose life has been ‘touched’ by a programme), or to reporting in a formulaic fashion against milestones in a project framework, rather than articulating and critically analysing what change really looks like. What is needed is a new model for capturing and communicating the complexity of stories of change.

4. Strengthening and connecting movements

The bulk of ActionAid’s experience with HRBA has been in connecting with people through partner Community Based Organizations and NGOs—who are sometimes overly moulded in the image of ActionAid (in part by the onerous planning, reporting and finance systems) and can become dependent on financial and technical support to such an extent that they lack a credible, independent identity or autonomous voice. But participants in the reflection meetings recognized that people organize and mobilize in diverse and often spontaneous ways so we need to be more flexible in the form of our partnerships and we need to deepen our understanding of how social and political movements are often central to advancing people’s rights. Indeed, building people’s collective agency and powerful, rooted movements was seen as key to confronting injustice and the structural causes of poverty, to pressuring governments to act responsibly, and to shifting power.

Many examples were shared about ActionAid’s work with movements and coalitions—including with Dalit movements in India, the embankment movement in Bangladesh, the safe cities movement in Cambodia, the smallholder women farmers’ network in Nigeria, the education movement in Mozambique, and the landless people’s movement in Brazil. Whilst ActionAid has diverse experience and has prioritized working with people’s

organizations and social movements for over 12 years, there was a desire to share more learning about strategies to build and sustain democratic movements of key groups (such as women smallholders, landless people, minority groups, youth)—from district to national to regional and international levels—especially keeping movements rooted. Movements need to be accountable to and owned by their members—and ActionAid needs to support and align with them, avoiding creating dependency or imposing institutional systems. There are valuable contributions from using participatory Reflection—Action processes with people’s groups, movements and coalitions at different stages of their development and at different levels—always reflecting on the practice of power (including of ActionAid staff). As an international NGO ActionAid should facilitate, guide and provide sustained support but not drive movements and coalitions or make them dependent on funding. In some cases funding can pervert or dilute the politics of movements, for example when funders insist on rigid administrative systems or structures.

The urgency to connect better with movements arose from the recognition that the capacity to link work from local to national to global level is central to using HRBA effectively. Whilst some transformations can be achieved through local action, in most cases isolated work in local rights programmes will not achieve deeper shifts in power or sustainable change. As such, local rights programmes in different areas need to develop strong connections to address the structural causes of poverty and inequality. ActionAid’s added value is often in being able to connect work, bringing voices, evidence and movements from the local level to inform change processes at national and international levels. Global and national work should always be rooted in the realities of people living in poverty—and the effectiveness of engagement at these higher levels should ultimately be judged on whether there is a tangible impact, over time, on the lives of people in local rights programmes.

5. Placing women’s rights at the centre

The analysis of each of the case studies presented included critical reflections on whether we had succeeded in placing women’s rights at the centre of the work. ActionAid’s prioritization of women’s rights has developed alongside its articulation of HRBA—but, as with HRBA, it has not always been easy to translate into practice. In several of the cases studies examined the connections with women’s rights were seen as tokenistic. Gender analysis may have been done at the start of programmes but it was not always clear how women were consistently engaged in struggles or would benefit from changes realized. Sometimes there was no proper power analysis and women’s participation was reduced to merely counting the number of women who joined an event. Similarly, in some policy positions and advocacy documents, the phrase, ‘especially women and girls’, was seen as sufficient ‘gender analysis’. As a result, there were no clear policy ‘asks’ in some campaigns or alternatives articulated as to what change should look like.

The consensus that emerged was that the time had come for ActionAid to (re)define the centrality of women’s rights even more boldly, positioning ActionAid explicitly and universally as an organization that believes in, is guided by the values of, and aspires to the visions offered by feminism. This means recognizing that the dominant system favours men and limits women’s access to economic, political and social opportunities, regardless of their race, class or religion, simply because they are women. Our response to this must be intersectional, challenging and changing the unequal power relations which underpin violations of women’s rights. Despite strong commitments to women’s rights over many years and

some excellent work on increasing women's leadership (including in emergencies), ActionAid had not yet assumed this as a core identity—and that lack of clarity had contributed, for example, to uneven practices in understanding and addressing hidden and invisible power. There were few mechanisms to ensure accountability to women's rights as a priority across the federation, so too often programmes focused on addressing practical rather than strategic needs. It was agreed that the next iteration of ActionAid's HRBA needs to be more strongly focused on addressing strategic gender needs—placing women's rights unequivocally and accountably at the centre of all programmes and campaigns.

Building on this there were reflections on how ActionAid understands 'the personal as political'—particularly given the tendency in using HRBA to focus more on the public than the private sphere. As individuals involved in development and social justice work we all need to be the change we want to see—to be coherent, to reflect on our own practice of power and to transform our own power. We need to examine how far we are willing to challenge power when we are personally invested—and to ensure that we do follow through with the courage of our convictions. This is not always easy and it is important for organizations like ActionAid to challenge the assumption that all staff who are recruited instantly share the values, attitudes, skills and knowledge needed for using HRBA. More attention to this is needed in recruitment, induction, performance tracking and continuous capacity development.

In fact ActionAid has invested a lot in rolling out training around HRBA and women's rights—with global, regional, national and local workshops backed up by key resource materials like People's Action in Practice, However it is acknowledged that training alone will not guarantee internalization or creative application and adaptation in practice. Other factors need to be considered including, for example, the careful selection of new staff and partners—and deeper ongoing engagement with them. The value of training can be rapidly undermined by high staff turnover that creates challenges for maintaining institutional knowledge and understanding. Every new member of staff will carry some cultural and gender baggage, so it is important to create a working environment that reinforces continuous reflection and positive challenging. There need to be clear non-negotiables for staff working for ActionAid and a shift from self-identification as professionals or experts towards being activists—who are agile and adaptive, not just development workers delivering a fixed HRBA. This means overhauling human resources policies and systems (especially through performance reviews), needing to do more to ensure that all staff and leaders are held to account for living the organization's values.

6. Overcoming tensions with the donor discourse

Through the three meetings there were many discussions about the potential tensions between the use of HRBA and donor discourse and requirements. The dominant donor paradigm is ever more focused on simplistic narratives, short-term quick wins, payment by results, value for money and so on. These are in tension with the complexity of long-term change processes and a focus on shifting power. It would be wrong to compromise the use of HRBA in pursuit of funding opportunities and ever-shifting donor priorities, but it is helpful to find discourses that help to bridge the divide. For example, when looking at value for money ActionAid's focus might be on how shifting power relations through HRBA has a profoundly sustainable value that direct delivery of services cannot match. However, this is hard to prove in the absence of better articulating new ways to understand and measure change processes—because

it is not sufficient to keep insisting that shifts in power relations cannot be ‘measured’. Guidance is needed on how staff and partners can navigate the donor discourse and emerging funding opportunities without compromising HRBA principles and values.

One of the particular challenges in this regard is to develop a deeper understanding of context and history. Too often development actors (sometimes including ActionAid and partners) create the fiction that they alone can bring about change, that the date when they started work was year zero and that no other forces are at work. Donor formats and expectations often reinforce this. But in fact every context is complex and every agency is simply making a contribution, with partners and others, at one point in time—building on the history of struggles and changes that have gone before. It is difficult to make a meaningful contribution without a long-term engagement as it takes time to understand each unique context—but within a long-term engagement it is important to retain flexibility, to analyse and respond to a constantly changing environment and ever-shifting forms of power. Organizations can become a part of people’s struggles—but those struggles pre-date and will post-date our engagement. Supporting sustained processes of reflection and action with the most excluded groups is key to catalysing a process of structural change and shifting power that is informed by history and relevant to the context.

7. Engaging with governments and defending public services

NGOs often have a problematic relationship with and view of governments, lacking an understanding of the power dynamics at play within governments. There is a need to move away from a view of governments as monoliths and to recognize that they are often spaces where power is being contested in complex ways. A better analysis should be undertaken of the different actors and forces at work within governments: who makes decisions, with what interests and under what influences (both visible and hidden). This is key to determining when and how to work with different institutions, structures, or individuals at different levels of government (local, district, national, federal). ActionAid’s present HRBA guidelines say little about the circumstances where it makes sense to collaborate with governments to advance a cause and, if links are made, how to retain the independence to resist and challenge governments when needed. Linked to this it would help to have further guidance on how to navigate dysfunctional or corrupt levels of government to advance change—even where a government overall may be contributing to the structural causes of poverty through pursuing harmful neoliberal policies. Given the crucial redistributive role of states, overall ActionAid’s HRBA should better describe how to use government structures and programmes and strengthen government capacity and institutions at different levels to advance alternatives and achieve change—whilst maintaining independence and critical perspectives.

The debate about engagement with government becomes particularly important in the context of defending equitable and accountable public services and challenging privatization. This work is not just a strategic option or a temporary priority—it is integral to the use of HRBA. Working on progressive tax that is progressively spent is core to HRBA and key to the redistribution of power. The fact that people pay tax (often unknowingly through Value Added Tax) is a defining part of the relationship between citizens and the state and a justification for why the state should provide basic public services that are free at the point of use. Some social and economic rights are subject to ‘progressive realization’, but governments should make efforts to allocate the maximum of available resources. This means it is essential to engage with the question of how countries are building a fair tax

base and how they are allocating spending in a progressive way. The increasing commercialization and privatization of services (which undermines public services and the accountability of the state) often represents a clear violation of rights and contributes to the perpetuation of inequality—charging people for something that should be free and often having a direct impact on increasing unpaid care by women (which has been a significant focus for ActionAid’s women’s rights work in several countries).

Sometimes, NGOs spend a lot of time fighting with governments for a progressive law or policy—and on securing something see their work as complete. But securing progressive laws and policies is only part of the journey. Using HRBA there needs to be explicit follow-through to ensure that progressive policies are resourced, implemented and creatively used to secure real change in people’s lives. It is easy to become complacent or to demobilize after getting a new law or policy passed (or a regressive policy repealed) as it marks an apparently triumphant end point (ticking a donor box), but in practice this should be seen as a new starting point. There is a need to ensure that there are sufficient budget allocations behind key policies and a need to track government spending in practice to ensure resources arrive and are used where they are most needed. But even if progressive laws and policies are in place and resourced there may still be crucial work to change attitudes and behaviours both of their intended beneficiaries and of their implementers. A progressive law on domestic violence will have little effect if police and court officials believe it is OK for men to beat up their wives—or if women themselves believe the same. Changing patriarchal values and beliefs is thus essential.

8. Developing a strategy for urban programming

Most of the case studies focused on work that was rooted in rural areas—apart from a couple that explored rights-based work under the safe cities campaign, for example in Cambodia. This reflects the predominant trend of ActionAid’s local rights programming—with only relatively tentative investment in urban programming, for example in Rio, Dhaka, Delhi and Nairobi. However, with urbanization now a global phenomenon and urban poverty rising faster than rural poverty, there is a clear need for ActionAid to articulate a comprehensive approach to rights-based programming in urban areas. There are distinct challenges when working in slum areas and so-called ‘illegal squatter settlements’, grappling with the insecurity of housing and services, engaging with labour markets and the informal sector, dealing with migrant women and shifting populations, connecting with trade unions and newer forms of social movement and organizing, and developing new models of rooted campaigning with urban constituencies. ActionAid’s present resources on HRBA lack guidance in this area. There was a rich debate on the need for specific tactics for working in the context of some cities in southern Africa that were never really designed to have women as permanent residents—based as they were on a supply of migrant male labour. In these contexts public services (whether lighting, housing, transport, education, or health) have little conception of what it means to be gender-responsive.

9. Ensuring a rights-based approach to service delivery

There were some tough exchanges with colleagues, for example in The Gambia and Sierra Leone, challenged by their peers for appearing to use service delivery as an end in itself—rather

than doing so in a way that is consistent with HRBA. This has been a long running area of tension in ActionAid and whilst some resources exist to provide guidance (see box below) there was a strong demand for sharpening guidance on what constitutes a truly rights-based approach to service delivery. Every context is unique and so it is difficult to develop a consistent understanding of the circumstances when service delivery might suitably help people on a clear path to securing their rights. In practice, in some cases people seem to have learnt the rights-based discourse and know how to ‘sugar coat’ work to make it appear consistent with HRBA—when there has been little genuine shift from the days when ActionAid routinely delivered services in response to the expressed needs of communities.

A checklist for rights-based service delivery (ActionAid 2012: 75)

In all the service delivery work we do to respond to basic needs, we need to ensure we are working in a rights-based way that is:

- deepening awareness of rights and the role of duty bearers, such as government
- creating deeper consciousness among people, facilitating a process of reflection and action
- building trust with local communities and strengthening their confidence to take rights-based action
- organizing people as rights activists, and deepening the strength of their organizations and leadership
- strengthening people’s communication and negotiation skills
- mobilizing people to hold the government accountable for providing their rights
- empowering women and challenging the gender division of labour
- involving children and young people, beginning to demonstrate the important contributions and role they play in community life
- giving people a positive experience of successful mobilization on a basic right—inspiring other actions on other rights

There was some very frank reflection on the challenges faced and the forces that drive service delivery in practice. Advocacy fatigue at community level was flagged as a common concern. People want more than awareness of their rights and the ability to demand their rights, especially where duty bearers are not responding as much or as fast as they should. HRBA takes time and can lead to frustrations—and sometimes ActionAid or its partners respond by stepping in and filling service gaps. The danger is when this becomes routine—when an entry point in fact becomes an end point. It was agreed that in the next strategy period ActionAid would need to take a stronger position about the role of service delivery—only ever being an entry point (and never an end in itself)—and that strictly enforced rules might be needed to prevent the building of schools or other infrastructure (except in exceptional circumstances).

10. Changing internal systems

ActionAid’s internal systems of planning, budgeting, reporting, accounting, monitoring and evaluation were analysed as sometimes being in tension with using HRBA. An effective use

of HRBA requires a high level of flexibility, responding to a shifting and unpredictable external environment—and this is difficult to do if you are locked into a mode of delivering on fixed plans and narrow accounting against budgets. It is important to be able to plan for the unexpected. Indeed, uncertainty is the new normal in the context of climate change and climate-induced disasters. Planning, budgeting, reporting and accounting systems and formats need to be simplified, streamlined and made more flexible—and they must absorb less of people’s time. This is something that was identified within ActionAid 20 years ago—leading to the development of the Accountability, Learning and Planning System (ALPS) (ActionAid 2011)—that was revolutionary in shifting the emphasis from planning to reporting, from budgeting to accounting—and elevating the importance of downward accountability. In recent years, particularly under pressure from donors, this philosophy was seen to have been diluted—and participants strongly supported the need to revisit and refresh the essential spirit of ALPS.

There was particular support for deepening ActionAid’s downward accountability—as a crucial step to building legitimacy for, and modelling good practice of, accountability of others. This means being transparent about plans and budgets, allowing people living in poverty in local rights programmes to scrutinize and challenge ActionAid and partners. This is a powerful part of using HRBA because it establishes a positive example for how all agencies with power (like ActionAid itself) can and should be held to account by those in whose name they work.

Finally, participants across the three meetings agreed on the need to better articulate how the politics of ActionAid’s internationalization process is connected to HRBA. Internationalization is the process through which ActionAid has sought to de-link money and power internally, creating a global headquarters in South Africa, registering as a national organization with national board and assembly in most countries—and creating a supreme international decision-making body, the ActionAid Assembly, where there is equal representation from all affiliated countries. Within the ActionAid federation there is a commitment to mutual accountability and dual citizenship (meaning that every country should have a strong national identity and an identity as part of the international federation). Basically this is about shifting the practice of power internally, situating governance and management responsibility as close to the ground as possible. ActionAid’s next iteration of its HRBA needs to go hand in hand with the next phase of internationalization—to build a federation that continues to shift power and fully lives by its values and HRBA principles.

11. Elements from ActionAid’s new strategy 2017–2028

The reflections above on ActionAid’s HRBA were a significant influence on the development of its new ten-year strategy that was agreed by the ActionAid Assembly in December 2016. Below are some excerpts that show the extent to which this process of critical reflection on ActionAid’s use of HRBA in practice has informed the future direction of the federation. Below are some elements taken from the new strategy: a clear identity statement (who we are), the updated theory of change, the overall programme framework and programme approach. This is presented in summary to give a flavour—but the full text of ‘Strategy 2028: Action For Global Justice’ is also available (ActionAid 2016).

WHO WE ARE

ActionAid is a global justice Federation working to achieve social justice, gender equality and poverty eradication. Throughout the world, ActionAid works to strengthen the capacity and active agency of people living in poverty and exclusion, especially women, to assert their rights. We work directly with communities, with people's organizations, women's movements, groups and networks, social movements and other allies to overcome the structural causes and consequences of poverty and injustice. We connect the work we do at community level with broader action for global justice at every level to make the greatest contribution towards a just, equitable and sustainable world.

Guided by feminist and human rights-based principles and approaches, we seek to shift and transform power, through empowerment, solidarity, campaigning and the generation of alternatives to ensure that every person can enjoy a life of dignity and freedom from all forms of oppression. ActionAid prioritizes the leadership of women and young people, especially those living in poverty and exclusion, in our efforts to achieve social justice, gender equality and poverty eradication. We create platforms for collective action and solidarity by enabling people around the world to unite and contribute to social justice struggles in various ways—as active citizens, supporters, staff and volunteers.

Around the world, ActionAid is rooted in the contexts where we operate and proudly upholds our primary accountability to the people most affected by unequal power relations.

ACTIONAID'S UPDATED THEORY OF CHANGE

Social justice, gender equality and poverty eradication are achieved through purposeful individual and collective action to shift unequal and unjust power, whether it is hidden, visible or invisible, from the household level to local, national and international levels. Empowerment of people living in poverty and exclusion is crucial. Active and organized people develop and drive change, which will transform power when led primarily by those who are directly affected, and by individuals committed to deepening democracy and achieving social justice.

Collective efforts and struggles are more impactful when linked through solidarity, campaigning and common cause between communities, people's organizations, social movements, citizen's groups and other allies to strengthen the power of people to drive structural change. This includes advocacy, campaigning and policy influencing to engage with power structures from local to global.

Change is not linear, and opportunities to drive social change, advance alternatives and resist injustice open up at different moments. Different contexts will require different strategies.

ActionAid is both a catalyst and a contributor to social change processes. We will be prepared to seize key moments for social transformation when they arise, and to resist backlash, guided by our long-term rootedness in communities and by working closely with people's organizations, social movements and other allies. ActionAid will also enable platforms for citizens' actions to hold duty bearers to account.

OVERALL PROGRAMME FRAMEWORK

To achieve social justice, gender equality and poverty eradication by shifting and redistributing power and resources, strengthening the resilience of communities and movements, and fulfilling the rights of people living in poverty and exclusion. We will contribute to change by:

- building power from below—our long-term work in communities
- linking social justice efforts and struggles and building collective power
- influencing and shifting power (visible, invisible and hidden)
- learning and generating alternatives.

12. Concluding reflections

A large number of organizations, whether governmental or non-governmental, claim to use a rights-based approach. Too often this is reduced to ‘preambulization’—an obsession with paying lip service to human rights in the opening preamble of documents but with very little follow-through. In many respects the new Sustainable Development Goals are a classic case in point.

Being systematic in framing and then using human rights-based approaches in practice requires much more than a good preamble. It requires concerted investment and continuing critical reflection based on learning from practice. There are many challenges in many contexts: in the context of weak or absent states or regressive governments; in the context of narrow donor requirements and development myths; in the context of people and communities that have come to expect and depend on service delivery; and in the context of staff and partners who may be more comfortable with the superficial discourse than the systematic practice of a rights-based approach.

ActionAid is far from perfect or uniform in the way that it uses HRBA but it has a deep commitment to continuing critical reflection based on practice and learning. There is much still to learn, including from many other organizations who have innovated with HRBA in other ways, so hopefully the insights above can offer some starting points for a wider collective reflection.

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