

IDS Working Paper 235

Rights-based approaches and beyond: challenges of linking rights and participation

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A joint initiative of the Participation Group at IDS and Just Associates

December 2004

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Summary

As more and more development and human rights organisations critically assess their impact and strategies, there is growing convergence in the questions they raise about how to be most effective in addressing structural, systemic causes of poverty and exclusion and thus, make a positive difference in the lives of poor and marginalised people. This paper explores the growing trend of “rights-based approaches” (RBA) to development, drawing from interviews with a range of primarily US-based international human rights and development organisations as well as from insights through the authors’ years of experience working with development and rights groups in the global south. While the *theory* of RBA has been broadly embraced as key to getting at the root causes of poverty, many organisations are struggling to make sense of the significance of RBA in *practice*. We begin to unravel some key concerns with a brief discussion on *critical considerations* for groups as they advance rights-based work. Next, we focus on *clarifying meanings*, offering our own definitions of what seem to be critical components of RBA, namely participation, rights, and power. Next we summarise some of the *current thinking and practice* among international human rights and development organisations that are deepening their work in RBA. This includes some of the key tensions, challenges and opportunities they are encountering. Finally, in *building on forgotten experiences and innovations* we look at a handful of practical experiences from the past that offer valuable insights and lessons as groups seek to maximise the full practical potential of RBA.

Keywords: rights, democracy, governance, participation.