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***Equity and Human Rights in Development: Differences and Similarities***

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I am happy for this opportunity today to comment on the similarities and differences between UNICEF’s equity approach and the human rights approach to development.

I want to start by citing two persons I got to know some years back in India. A young landless labourer told me – when I first got to know her - that all the people of her village were friends. Gheeta was her name. After some time she realised that I was not a spy for the landlord or for the village administration, and she told me a different story:

I quote: I find it very unfair that some people have so much food, and we have so little. It should have been equal. But if I would ask a question to the landlord, he would punish me. There is nothing in the world that I fear more than the rich. I am afraid of their harassment, afraid of their violence. And I am afraid of losing my job.

In another village, in a different state, I got to know a landlord. His name is Sanjay. In the beginning, he told me that they were all good friends in his village. After four months or so, also he told me a different story.

He said: We don’t like people from lower castes. We don’t like to see casteless and low-caste people own land. So sometimes villages get demolished, or families get killed. Many have been killed, because they wanted to develop or because they demanded higher salaries.”

Gheeta’s and Sanjay’s situations are not unique. You can find similar stories in several countries.

For this reason – as well as several others – UNICEF’s equity approach is important. An equity approach helps us focus on people, not services or things. It can help us identify and change the inequity between Gheeta and Sanjay. How then can Unicef reach its goal of equity? I will argue that a human rights approach is the way to go.

UNICEF is a human rights based organisation and has developed good tools for applying human rights in its programming. It is way ahead of any other UN organisation when it comes to the implementation of the rights-based approach.

I will now compare a few of the components of the human rights-based approach to development with UNICEF’s equity approach. I base it on the Unicef report Narrowing the Gaps to Reach the Goals, which is a couple of years old but still a reference document for UNICEF’s equity approach.

There are more or less seven core principles of rights-based approaches, as you can see on the slide. I will chose some and compare them with elements of the equity approach. Let me start with the human rights principles of **non-discrimination and human dignity**. It takes the side of people who suffer injustice by acknowledging their equal worth and dignity. The human rights approach has a particular focus on individuals being marginalised, vulnerable or excluded, could be persons with disabilities, migrants and ethnic and religious minorities, women or children.

The ordinary approach to the Millennium Development Goals, on the other hand, can make it tempting to cherry-pick the more well-off among the poor and ignore the excluded groups. It might seem easier to reach the goals in this way.

Non-discrimination is a backbone of the UNICEF’s equity approach, according to the report. It even stresses that the quickest and cheapest way to reach the Millenium Development Goals is by focusing on the most disadvantaged. I would also argue that human dignity is a basis for the approach, although it is not explicitly mentioned. Thus, it shares two of the central keys of the human rights foundation. By focusing on the principle of non-discrimination and the human value of individuals, it can help break cycles of discrimination, disadvantage and poverty, in line with the human rights approach.

For the same reason it is promising that the report stresses the importance of collecting disaggregated data, in this way only, we are able to identify the most deprived children and communities.

The equity approach and the human rights approach make us look at the world through the same lens of non-discrimination, equality and human dignity.

But. There are also gaps between the human rights approach and the equity approach. To my point of view, the gap goes along two lines: the lack of focus on the right-holders’s active role in claiming their rights – here I mean the inhabitants of a given country – and the lack of focus on the duty-bearers’s duties – here I talk about the government of the country.

First a few words about the rights-holders. In a human rights approach, the principles of empowerment and participation are essential. It sees all people as entitled to participate actively and meaningfully in society. It also means that it focuses on the causes of poverty. Exclusion, vulnerability and lack of entitlement are often identified as reasons for poverty. As was the case for Gheeta. UNICEF’s equity report acknowledges that **it is not enough to look at the number of schools built, the number of vaccines available etc. They also look at who gets access and who don’t.**

**However, the human rights approach goes one step further. It makes us look at why some people get access and some don’t.**

It is surprising that it is possible to talk about promoting equity without mentioning the potential power relationships that the approach may challenge in societies.

Then a few words about the governmental duties. Governments have a **duty to respect, protect and fulfill human rights. This means that** the government must be accountable. It also means that rule of law must be accessible for all. As an example, governments could establish children’s ombuds offices, court systems and para-legal systems, from the local level to the national. The governmental obligations also mean that there should be **transparent** systems in place, so people for example can follow the money and know their rights. The UNICEF document states that governments are responsible to ensure children’s rights. However, important measures such as rule of law, accountability and transparency are not mentioned. How then will the children and their communities be able to claim their rights? And how then will they be able to avoid setbacks and repeating stories of poverty and inequity?

UNICEF’s new equity approach is impressive. The policy considerations are important. The research behind the findings is remarkable. I really appreciate the new shift. It can help us tune our efforts towards those who need them the most.

The organisation has taken a first important step. I know that UNICEF will continue to develop the approach. In your future analyses of equity, I would like to see it even better linked up to human rights - UNICEF’s own human rights approach. The human rights approach can strengthen the process towards equity and welfare – and make the results more sustainable. Qualitative and quantitative research shows this clearly.

Therefore – in the time to come, we should make sure that we don’t develop parallel programmes to reach more or less the same goals. In the future, I hope that UNICEF’s equity approach and your human rights approach will have merged into one.

Thank you.