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Rights thinking

Ken Burnett describes an approach to charity that shows recipients they are entitled to a better future

Ken Burnett

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Living free from hunger and poverty is not just a need but also a right: discuss. This would be a good exam question not only for students of international development but also for anyone working to making poverty history. The rights-based approach to eradicating poverty is contentious but, after decades of, at best, partial success using other methods, many aid agencies are moving towards it.

"The difference between the rights-based and traditional charity approaches to development," says Koy Thomson, a director at the charity ActionAid, "can be seen in the faces of two people I met recently - one near Hanoi, the other in Delhi. In Delhi, I met a street dweller and petty trader who was being hassled by the police. He asked my colleague, 'What are you, aid worker, going to do to help me?'

"He was astonished to be told, 'Nothing'." But then my colleague explained, 'I can show you what actions you can take yourself to secure your right to live and work on the street.'

"The woman in Vietnam was a member of a group savings scheme," Thompson goes on. "[The group] had been given a pig that wasn't healthy. She also asked what ActionAid could do for her. But here there was no opportunity for interaction, because clearly she would accept whatever she was given. She reacted passively to outside charity because it was beyond her control. But the man in Delhi was fired up to get what was rightfully his."

The examples are simplified to make the point. Even with the best intentions, aid can disempower if it fails to give poor people a voice and a chance to act. People are more likely to respond actively if aid is based on satisfying rights rather than just meeting needs.

Plenty of examples show the rights approach works. In Kenya, \$20 (£11) could buy one school uniform or pay for two young people to lobby their MPs to pass a law making a lack of a uniform no barrier to education. In Uganda, \$200 bought textbooks in one school, but a similar sum enabled district officials to show their government evidence of lack of resources, thus influencing how \$2m of EU aid was spent. Though less tangible, the latter, rights-based approach was a far more effective use of donors' money.

But sometimes there is no choice. ActionAid sees delivering services as an integral part of rights work. Such practical work is "a means to an end but never an end in itself", says Thomson. "And it must include information, knowledge and training, not just buildings and materials."

The rights approach goes much further. It demands detailed analysis, community organisation, planning and a host of other skills and sensitivities.

Taaka Awori, director of ActionAid Ghana, is a fervent advocate of ActionAid's policy on rights. "Poor people take risks," she explains, "for example, when a farmer takes time from his fields to negotiate with government officials. Donors, too, take calculated risks, because not every rights initiative will pay off. But it's a better spread of risks than earlier approaches that often weren't working.

"To do rights-based work," she says, "you need to be prepared to live by the principles you are advocating. The approach [concerns] not just what you do in communities and society [but also] how accountable and transparent you are to the people you work with. Both aid workers and donors have to reflect the change we want to see in the world.'

Some donors may feel uncomfortable with a rights approach to poverty because it challenges the established social order. But it is a way of working that is more likely to make poverty history.

The pursuit of rights need not be seen as threatening. Active citizens pressing for accountability and transparency will improve services, thus possibly making governments more popular. Even the World Bank sees transparency and accountability as desirable. And they help poor people to get what they are due.

Rights are not new. Most successful states are built on a foundation of human rights. But rights have also long been denied to vulnerable groups, notably women, in many countries. Along with pursuing a rights agenda, aid agencies also have to develop a robust theory as to why some people's rights are denied. Koy Thomson says: "Our staff now need much more than local knowledge. Our analysis has to be right."

Rights work is challenging and difficult - even dangerous. Aid workers are often not seen as neutral: sometimes they threaten vested interests; they have been assaulted and killed. As I began this piece, three ActionAid workers, all women, were killed by gunmen in Afghanistan. Though the precise reason behind this tragedy is unknown, the immediate response of local staff - beyond tightening security procedures - has been a determination to honour the memory of their colleagues by continuing the fight for women's rights.

• Ken Burnett is a trustee of ActionAid International and BookAid International. He writes for SocietyGuardian.co.uk in a private capacity and the views expressed here are his own.

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