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What is the "rights-based approach" all about?
Perspectives from international development agencies

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Summary

In the last few years, there has been growing talk amongst development actors and agencies about a "rights-based approach" to development. Yet what exactly this consists of remains unclear. For some, its grounding in human rights legislation makes such an approach distinctive, lending it the promise of re-politicising areas of development work that have become domesticated as they have been "mainstreamed" by powerful institutions like the World Bank. Others complain that like other fashions it has become the latest designer item to be seen to be wearing and has been used to dress up the same old development.

This paper seeks to unravel some of the tangled threads of contemporary rights talk. Where is today's rights-based discourse coming from? Why rights and why now? What are the differences between versions and emphases articulated by different international development actors? What are their shortcomings, and what do these imply for the practice and politics of development? Reflecting on these questions, we explore some of the implications of the range of different ways of relating human rights to development.

We argue that ultimately, however it is operationalised, a rights-based approach would mean little if it has no potential to achieve a positive transformation of power relations among the various development actors. Thus, however any agency articulates its vision for a rights-based approach, it must be interrogated for the extent to which it enables those whose lives are affected the most to articulate their priorities and claim genuine accountability from development agencies, and also the extent to which the agencies become critically self-aware and address inherent power inequalities in their interaction with those people.