

How Can a Human Rights-Based Approach Contribute to Poverty Reduction? The Relevance of Human Rights to Sustainable Development Goal One



Hans-Otto Sano

Contents

1	Introduction	12
2	The Critique of the Neoliberal Agenda	13
3	The Universal Basic Income	17
4	Human Rights and Poverty in Local Contexts	18
5	Conclusion	24
	References	25

Abstract Addressing how a human rights-based approach can contribute to poverty reduction, the chapter reflects critically on the tendency of human rights research to imbed poverty analysis in somewhat undocumented allegations such as for instance the impact of neoliberal policies. Research based evidence on human rights and poverty reduction is only modestly available and mostly in local studies. The chapter argues that there are experiences from human rights-based endeavours at the local level that need to be taken into account when addressing how human rights-based approaches can contribute to the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 1 (SDG 1). Positive cases of empowerment processes and improved equal access to services exist. New technology may also offer opportunities for empowerment of the poor and for greater rights-based accountability. Such examples must be included rather than an exclusive focus on negative developments, for instance, with respect to deteriorating equality at national and global levels. The struggles that social actors undertake from below should be recognized and be given voice, even when human rights are discussed with a global perspective.

H.-O. Sano (✉)

The Danish Institute for Human Rights, Copenhagen K, Denmark

e-mail: hosa@Humanrights.dk

© The Author(s) 2020

M. Kaltenborn et al. (eds.), *Sustainable Development Goals and Human Rights*,

Interdisciplinary Studies in Human Rights 5,

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-30469-0_2

1 Introduction

Are human rights effective in reducing poverty? And in what ways are they relevant in the context of SDG 1 to ending poverty? In this chapter I aim to provide reflections on these questions. Poverty is not a concept grown in the human rights garden and human rights scholars and actors do not always manage to undertake in depth analysis, when it comes to analyses of poverty numbers, groups, and mobility. An analysis of how human rights contribute to poverty reduction will therefore prompt interdisciplinary approaches, typically a combination of a development and human rights approach in the context of the Global South.

In 2000, Mary Robinson, former High Commissioner for Human Rights described poverty as the “worst human rights problem today”.¹ Since then international attention given to poverty as a significant human rights challenge has largely disappeared.² The lack of priority given to poverty during the last decade—and even before—has implied that the international human rights discourse has had a diffuse agenda with respect to poverty and development. While human rights scholars and activists consider poverty important as it pertains to discriminatory practices, the subject tends to be overridden by discussions of vulnerability. Knowledge about who exactly is “poor” is weak, and analytical work on changes in poverty tends to be missing. The lack of attention in this field has consequentially resulted in little evidence being accumulated on human rights and poverty reduction. Local and international human rights NGOs have continued to combine a human rights-based approach with poverty reduction, but these experiences are not always well-documented and questions remain as to their sustainability.³ Where does this then leave the human rights community with respect to the SDG 1: End Poverty in All Its Forms Everywhere? What kind of role can human rights play in addressing the five targets of this goal? The targets address both number, access to services, and social protection systems.⁴

¹Vizard (2006), p. 3.

²See Alston (2017b), the Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty in his most recent report, p. 5: “For its part, the human rights community has had all too little to offer in response to the profound challenges associated with deep economic insecurity. The human rights to an adequate standard of living, to work and to social security have been very low on the list of human rights priorities of the major human rights groups and of the principal international and regional human rights organizations, with the exception of the International Labour Organization (ILO).”

³See for instance Schmitz (2012), p. 540. See also Dugard (2014). Also Duni et al. (2009), Broberg and Sano (2017), Mustaniemi-Laakso and Sano (2017).

⁴The first two targets address the number of men, women and children living in poverty and in extreme poverty. Target 3 addresses the need for implementation of appropriate social protection systems, including floors. Target 4 relates to the equal access to resources and to services, in particular of the poor and vulnerable, including control over land and inheritance, while Target 5 addresses the need for resilience of the poor and of those in vulnerable situations. See also Sano and McInerney-Lankford (2016). In the present chapter, I shall deal with access to services, relevant for target 4, while not with access to for instance land resources. Also, the chapter will not address target 5 on resilience of the poor.

The general response of the human rights community when discussing poverty and human rights (few studies or reports have thoroughly addressed human rights and SDG One) has been formulated across three different lines of arguments. One line of argumentation takes shelter in a critique of the neoliberal agenda. This is in many ways a familiar argument dating back to the 1990s, but it is partly inadequate with respect to the scale of today's poverty challenges. Another strategy is to develop a normative argument. Thomas Pogge and his colleagues have developed one normative approach to poverty reduction, i.e., the moral obligation to eradicate poverty.⁵ However, there are also new normative approaches. The Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty has developed thinking on the need for a universal basic income.⁶ Questions remain, however, on the effectiveness of these approaches in terms of more immediate impact on groups living in poverty.

Thirdly, there are human rights scholars and actors who have made an effort to understand how human rights efforts work in various contexts, partly with respect to poverty, and based on case studies. I shall draw on some of these studies including sometimes conflicting evidence. Many studies in the human rights field are case studies inspired by human rights-based bottom up approaches. However, I shall also draw on data on national poverty reduction results in order to capture national trends of poverty.

What follows is a development of these three arguments and what then may be viewed as the most feasible strategy in determining how the human rights community can contribute to SDG 1.

2 The Critique of the Neoliberal Agenda

A repeated view among human rights scholars is that many social problems in the Global South are attributable to a neoliberal world order, or to market fundamentalism as Samuel Moyn coined the neoliberal policy trend dating back to the 1980s.⁷ I define neoliberalism as a theoretically based set of policies which emphasize that value in society is determined by market-driven competition and that economic growth will be engendered by deregulation of public sector control and by allowing space for private entrepreneurship. Neoliberal policy designs stress general downsizing of the role of the public sector in the economy, enhanced competition, and market-driven change where market prices are instrumental in allocating resources in the economy.⁸ These general explanations for many global ailments

⁵See Pogge (2007).

⁶Alston (2017a).

⁷Moyn (2014). Moyn's project is as a counterclaim to Susan Marks and Naomi Klein to dissociate the human rights revolution of the 1970s to the near simultaneous neoliberal ascendance to a mainstream orthodoxy of the 1980s. See also Moyn (2018).

⁸Birch (2017), pp. 16–31. See also Metcalf (2017).

have been forwarded over many years, but the question is if the recourse to neoliberal influence is accurate enough today to provide sufficient insight into the intricacies of how the global and the local interact. The risk of this well-rehearsed critique is that it precludes motivations to examine how market forces and political processes unfold on the ground. Not least with respect to poverty and rights interaction, empirical curiosity is warranted.

The dignitaries of neoliberalism are Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman, prominent libertarian scholars writing in the 1960s and 1970s, arguing for deregulation, privatization and for market reform against the dominance of the welfare state. Institutionally, neoliberal economic policies became a strong feature of policy prescriptions of the IMF and the World Bank during the 1980s and 1990s.⁹ In the prescriptions promoted by the *Bretton Woods* institutions, developing countries marked by low growth, budget and balance of payment deficits and in some cases by hyperinflation were to undertake budget cuts, pursue growth-oriented policies, regulate exchange rates, and work for the privatization of sectors of the economy. These prescriptions prevailed in the so-called structural adjustment programs. Structural adjustment lending was mostly made conditional upon the alteration of specific policies such as reduction in subsidies, exchange rate adjustment according to market values of the exchange, and budget deficit cuts.¹⁰ Easterly's skepticism on the positive impact of the structural adjustment era during the early 2000s is symptomatic of a range of critical assessments being formulated from both within and outside financial institutions. During the first decade of the 2000s the neoliberal dogma in the form of structural adjustment programs no longer had a strong appeal within the IFIs.¹¹ It is interesting to note that in 2013, William Easterly, a former employee of the World Bank, published *The Tyranny of Experts: Economists, Dictators, and the Forgotten Rights of the Poor*—10 years after the work quoted above. In this work, he is critical of the authoritarian technocrats who interfere unduly in the lives of the local population and who disrespect their rights.¹²

⁹For a broader review, see Michael Freeman in a lecture given at Dokuz Eylül University Law School, Izmir, Turkey, under the auspices of the Raoul Wallenberg Institute on 10 November 2014.

¹⁰For an analysis of the poverty effect of adjustment policies, see World Bank economist Easterly (2003), pp. 365 and 378–379. Easterly concludes that adjustment lending according to his analysis had no effect on economic growth, while at the same time reducing the positive impact on poverty that growth could have during expansionary periods.

¹¹It is symptomatic that the themes chosen for the World Development Reports during the decade from 2001–2010 concerned poverty (2001), market institutions (2002), sustainable development (2003), services for the poor (2004), health (2005), equity (2006), youth (2007), agriculture (2008), economic geography (2009), and climate change (2010). The hard-core economic themes were abandoned to some extent in favor of social problems and sustainable development. Voices from inside the IMF wrote in 2016: “instead of delivering growth, some neoliberal policies have increased inequality, in turn jeopardizing durable expansion”. See Ostry et al. (2016). See also earlier contributions by Chorev and Babb (2009), pp. 459–484.

¹²See Easterly (2013). The book emphasizes civil, political as well as economic and social rights, but does so without very strong human rights reference. Easterly's focus is in many ways inspired by Hayek, an anti-authoritarian, libertarian viewpoint.

The questions emerge then: Is there still a neoliberal project, how has it been reshaped, and why is this important to raise in a chapter on human rights, the SDGs and poverty? My points are twofold in this regard: firstly, there is a risk in human rights thinking that the normative focus will suppress a more elaborate, and sometimes needed historical and evidence-based analysis. Along with this tendency is that human rights scholars too often appeal to simplified notions of e.g. neoliberalism without acknowledging that the reality today does not accurately reflect neoliberal thinking nor does it reflect the extent to which it prevailed earlier.

Without strong reference to human rights, Heloise Weber argues that the SDG project and its goal of “Leaving No One Behind” is ideologically motivated based on neoliberal policies. The SDG provisions will privilege the upholding of commercial interests over commitments to universally ensure entitlements to address fundamental life-sustaining needs. *“The SDGs as a framework for global development integrates (comprehensively), what has been evolving as a neo-liberal development project at least since the 1980s.”* An emphasis is placed *“on realizing an unqualified conception of economic growth.”*¹³

While Weber has only scant references to human rights, her critical points on neoliberalism resonate with the recent book by Manfred Nowak, *Human Rights or Global Capitalism* from 2017. Nowak argues, *“we see the results of globalization driven by neoliberal market forces: growing inequality, poverty, and growing economic, food, financial, social and ecological crises. In addition, we witness increasing threats to our global human security resulting from transnational organized crime and terrorism, a proliferation of weapons and armed conflicts, fragile states and global climate change.”*¹⁴ With respect to education, for instance, Nowak maintains that privatization of education is an important trend presently and that this occurs due to the influence of neoliberal policies and the structural adjustment policies of the IMF and the World Bank,¹⁵ but his evidence of privatization is anecdotal and not based on very recent evidence (a major reference on education is from 2005); generally the reader misses clear links to either neoliberalism or to structural adjustment programs—or documentation of recent trends of privatization. Privatization of educational institutions can be motivated by other forces than neoliberal prescriptions. Furthermore, a tendency which is sometimes found in human rights studies is that they refer to other human rights studies with the result that arguments on economic and social analyses may carry the risk, in some cases, of becoming self-referential.¹⁶

¹³Weber (2017).

¹⁴Nowak (2017).

¹⁵Nowak (2017), p. 60.

¹⁶This is a tendency that is not peculiar to human rights, but the interdisciplinary perspective that is needed in discussions on economic and social trends can be found to be meager in the human rights literature. A similar tendency characterizes economic scholarly work which often completely ignores that human rights concerns are relevant in many economic domains. The most recent World Development Report of the World Bank from 2018 has education and learning as a theme: Learning to Realize Education’s Promise. It contains no references to “Privatization” or to

So while a neoliberal scapegoat prevails at least in some quarters, is this an entirely misconceived proposition? With globalization and the de-linking of social relations from territorial geography, the power of market forces has not been diminished. Furthermore, the rise of income inequalities has resulted in the fact that the working and lower middle class groups in the Western world have become losers in the last 20 years of globalization, while the winners have been the poor and middle classes of the Asian nations, according to Branko Milanovic. Significantly, winners have also been the richest groups in the old Western world.¹⁷ At the same time, it should also be emphasized that during the period from the 1990s to the present, equality of opportunity has increased as measured by access to basic education and in some cases basic health services.¹⁸ Along with the processes of enhanced economic inequalities and with winner and loser trends of globalization, perspectives on populist and neo-conservative and nationalist influence have emerged as important descriptive and explanatory elements of poverty and exclusion.¹⁹

In their assessment of socio-economic rights in South Africa, Langford et al. describe South Africa as the awkward hybrid of neoliberal economic policies and a corporate welfare state.²⁰ They refer to neoliberalism as an emphasis on trade flows, policies of exchange rate stability, competitive labour markets, and friendly investment environments.²¹ However, what is perhaps also characteristic of states such as South Africa and their response to prevailing economic downturns has been populist and corrupt policies that may have rhapsodic reference to land rights, as in Zimbabwe, or to urban jobs in South Africa, but lack real impact on poverty.²²

In essence, the critique of a neoliberal world order today may miss a focus on neo-conservative and populist influence on policies, and they may fail to see that free markets propounded by neoliberals are replaced in part by protectionist markets favoured by conservative power holders in alliance with free market corporate sectors. An important trend is also that whereas the Bretton Woods institutions earlier could be seen as propounding the neoliberal agenda, the agenda today lacks prominent institutional agency at the international level. These broad policy trends constitute the complex patterns in which poverty and human rights policies have to

“Privatize”, but seven references to “private sector”, nine if footnotes are included. The report assesses the excluding and negative impact of school fees, see e.g. pp. 117–118.

¹⁷See Milanovic (2016). See also Oxfam (2017).

¹⁸Millennium Development Goal measurement. See for instance narrowing disparities in female primary school completion rates or in infant mortality rates.

¹⁹Milanovic speaks of populism and nativism, see World Development Report of the World Bank (2018), pp. 204–211.

²⁰In his analysis of rights-based change in Latin America, Gledhill (2009), p. 38, argues that the forces of neo-liberalism and the multilateral institutions now seem to recognize claims to collective land from indigenous groups as long as these are not interfering with capitalist interests in land or with sub-soil resources.

²¹Langford et al. (2014).

²²See Ismail (2015).

operate. In order to understand how this may work, it is paramount to gain evidence on what works and what is workable under existing political economy relations.

3 The Universal Basic Income

In a report to the Human Rights Council during the summer 2017, the Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty, Philip Alston, presented new perspectives on poverty and human rights by forwarding ideas on supplementing the existing social protection systems with a universal basic income.²³ Alston based his strongly formulated report on the profound challenges associated with deep economic insecurity. Rights to an adequate standard of living and to social security have been very low on the list of priorities of major human rights groups and of international and regional human rights organizations. He drew up an image of the human rights system that—faced with the challenges of addressing economic insecurity—will keep marching along a path mapped out long ago in a zombie mode that will gradually drain the lifeblood of the enterprise (p. 5).

The trends that need to be addressed, according to Alston, are:

- The precarious nature of unemployment;
- The difficulties of regulating the labour market;
- The redundance of part of the labour force by automation and robotization;
- The unstoppable growth in inequality; and
- The ascent of a new neoliberal agenda accompanied by fetishization of low tax rates, demonization of the administrative State, deregulation as a matter of principle, and the privatization of the remaining State responsibilities in the social sector that would undermine prospects of social rights respect.

The universal basic income would be an entitlement payable to all in society regardless of income, wealth, age, and gender. Alston recognizes that there are substantial costs involved—a calculation is presented for Catalonia in Spain and for the Democratic Republic of Congo predicated on an estimate amount of 25% of national per capita income.²⁴ However, the utopia should not be rejected out of hand. Policymakers at national and international levels need to develop creativity in social policy that is capable of responding to technological challenges and other developments.

However, the image drawn up by Alston that there are no promising pathways on the human rights horizon tends to miss two important perspectives: the reduction in the numbers of poor people across the Global South and the existence of human rights struggles at the local level—the experience of which should not be ignored.

²³Alston (2017a).

²⁴See the report elaborated in OECD (2017).

4 Human Rights and Poverty in Local Contexts

The available literature on human rights and development and on human rights-based approaches can help in answering three questions that are crucial to understanding the kind of challenges that will influence SDG implementation of targets and indicators of SDG 1.

- How entrenched is poverty both in terms of numbers and in terms of social mobility?
- How is equal access to resources and services hampered by existing institutional structures?
- How can rights-holders in turn forward effective claims against the duty-bearers?

Poverty in Numbers and Processes of Change

In most countries the share of population below a poverty line defined by e.g. incomes or below standards of deprivation set by health, education and living standards indicators as the ones defined in the Multidimensional Poverty Index (used in this chapter) has fallen significantly. Table 1 compares the incidence of national, urban, and rural poverty during the second half of the former decade (Ghana is an exception as its timespan dates back to 2003).

Table 1 The incidence of poverty

Tanzania	2015/16	2010	2008
National	56.6	61.1	65.7
Urban	27.7	34.8	39.5
Rural	68.6	68.9	72.8
Ghana	2014	2008	2003
National	33.7	41.9	58.7
Urban	17.6	20.6	36.2
Rural	49.4	58.4	74.9
South Africa	2014/15	2012	2008
National	9.2	10.5	17.8
Urban	3.6	5.4	9.4
Rural	17.2	18.3	30.4
Bangladesh	2014	2011	2007
National	41.3	49.6	59.1
Urban	22.5	26.1	37.4
Rural	48.2	57.0	65.9
Indonesia	2012	2007	N/A
National	15.5	20.8	
Urban	10.2	13.2	
Rural	20.7	26.4	

Five country cases during the present and the former decade

Source: Oxford Poverty Human Development Initiative. *Multidimensional Poverty Index*

What is noteworthy is the variation in the incidence of poverty. More than two-thirds of the population in rural Tanzania are affected, while only about 4% of the urban population in South Africa are. In all five included country cases, poverty has fallen, with the exception of Ghana and Bangladesh where the fall is steady between the years of the table, and the fall in percentage points is most substantial during the former decade. In South Africa, the decrease is minimal between 2012 and 2014/15, i.e. during the recent period of Zuma's populist regime.

The methodology for identification of poor households devised under the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI), is the so-called Global Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI). The MPI measures overlapping and simultaneous dimensions of deprivations. Similar to the Human Development Index, it measures indicators across three dimensions: health, education and living standards. The effort to develop a multidimensional poverty index was partly inspired by basic needs thinking. Household incomes or expenditures are not part of the measurement.²⁵ The MPI is not based on a rights-based method, but it is premised on measuring deprivation that relates to the right to education, the right to health and to food, and to adequate living standards.²⁶ However, it must be underlined that the indicators used in the index have not been conceived with a human rights-based approach in mind.

The patterns in Table 1 indicate therefore that poverty is diminishing in countries of the Global South, but with a marked slowing of pace in the rural areas. The mobility of people moving out of poverty is significant during the observed decades, something that may bode well for the ending of poverty; however, the challenges of entrenched poverty prevail in rural areas in particular. If human rights work should contribute to the realization of the SDG 1, part of the work should therefore take place in the rural areas or should have an impact there.

Equal Access to Services and Institutional Impediments

When raising questions on equality of access to services, the literature on the implementation of a human rights-based approach offers insights that are based on evidence, mostly qualitative, and by evaluation studies. These studies are valuable, but rare, and even rarer is the availability of studies based on research methods: most of the insights that can be obtained from these works are based on experiences from project-based work. This means that the reality outside the financed project reviewed is not taken into account in a detailed manner. Another limitation of the available studies is that there is no documented focus on poverty. Human rights programming often follows a logic of disaggregation which pays attention to discrimination

²⁵For more see Alkire and Robles (2015).

²⁶Relevantly, we could also raise questions on unequal access to resources, e.g. women's land and inheritance rights, but this issue is not addressed in this chapter.

against women, maybe against elderly groups, and according to ethnic groups, but it is not very attentive to how poverty is redressed through human rights-based programming. In brief the question is this: can the implementation of human rights-based approaches contribute to the redress of prevailing service inequalities in favour of poor households? What are the obstacles?

Three studies^{27,28,29} point to gaps between the rhetorical ambition of the human rights-based approach and actual implementation. Destrooper emphasizes gaps between the discursive attention to e.g. human rights principles³⁰ and what is actually operationalized in programming, and subsequently realized or implemented. The program which she and her team reviewed is a UNICEF program on water and sanitation. However, the research expresses a negative assessment according to all 12 scores reviewed. In terms of equality, non-discrimination and inclusion, the researcher concludes that the instruments developed for achieving inclusivity—such as quotas—are often not imbedded in the local reality (p. 805). Thus, this research documentation raises questions on the realism of particular elements of a human rights-based approach, but also questions the consistency with which the approach was implemented in this particular program.³¹ The appropriateness of the rights-based approach in the form of the UN defined principles and modalities could therefore be called into question in the context of this particular work.

In Ghana, Sano and Anyidoho reviewed access to education, health, water and sanitation services in two villages in the Volta Region, one having received support from Danida and Government of Ghana funding. Their report tells a more positive story in terms of access to services by the poor in the village supported, but it also points to the substantial differences of access between this favoured village and the one in the neighbouring district. The differential approach between villages and districts is due in part to the government's policies which favour effective districts (measured according to governance indicators) over less effective ones. Thus, a conflict between governance and human rights policies may result from the fact that both policy sets have an influence. This conflict can be said to reflect exactly a conflict between a human rights-based approach and an effectiveness and efficiency perspective more aligned to neoliberal thinking. Concerning the access to services, the quantitative data of the researchers showed improvements in local perception of water services, and perceptions of improvements among the poor and non-poor groups with respect to sanitation in the village supported by Government. In the

²⁷Destrooper (2016).

²⁸Sano and Anyidoho (2016).

²⁹Critical Rights and Gender Consult (2017).

³⁰See for instance OHCHR (2018).

³¹The article is, however, not very informative on the actual results of the program. This author had to identify an evaluation that was actually undertaken of the program in 2012 to get an idea about that there were some positive results. EAA pour la compte du gouvernement de la République Démocratique du Congo et Le Fonds de Nations Unies pour l'Enfance (UNICEF), 2012. Evaluation du Programme Ecole et Village Assainis. Rapport Final.

contiguous village, only a minority saw improvements in sanitation services. With respect to education, more than 90% of the households had on average three to four family members attending primary school, and with no marked differences between the two villages. In the less affluent village, quite a lot of the parents indicated that they paid for education.

With respect to malnourishment and mortality, more of the poor households had members who had experienced child mortality. Nearly all households in both villages attended the village clinic and used the town hospital. In both villages, about three-quarters of the population perceived that health services had improved. This could be due to that fact that services are subsidized under the National Health Insurance Scheme. The report went on to conclude that the human rights-based approach, where operational locally, contributed in making access to services more equitable. Thus under-five malnourishment was significantly lower in the community which had benefitted from human rights-based support.³²

With respect to the DanChurchAid documentation of the results of the rights-based approach, the consultant (Sarah Forti) analyzed the results in terms of three concepts: *Representation*, *Recognition* and *Redistribution*. She reviewed supported projects in Cambodia and Uganda.

Regarding *Representation*, across the communities in Cambodia, there were testimonies of strengthened qualitative and quantitative participation into claiming land rights. In Uganda, she observed increased participation of marginalized communities through community monitors. With respect to *Recognition*, she found indications among duty-bearers in Cambodia that they recognized that rights-holders could make land rights claims and that there were legitimate claims in terms of land evictions (p. 25). In Uganda, the community monitors were recognized by the rights-holders as well as—in some cases—by duty-bearers (p. 24). Concerning *Redistribution*, reallocation of grabbed land had occurred in Cambodia and there were signs of slight shifts in the balance of power between rights-holders and duty-bearers. In Uganda, limited reallocation of resources could be seen especially when women were chairing committees; however, this happened in situations with decreasing budgets.

The study therefore found that firstly the main effects of the human rights-based approach were at the individual level in terms of accessing or re-accessing livelihood resources and public services rather than at the systemic and institutional level; secondly that *Representation* seemed to be the aspect that could best be fulfilled from the rights-holder perspective (p. 6). Across cases it was possible to address human rights violations in a better way, i.e. a matter of *Recognition*. However, *Redistribution* seemed difficult to strengthen solely from the point of view of rights-holders.

After reviewing these studies—all addressing the matter of services and equality from different angles—it seems plausible that a human rights-based approach

³²Sano and Anyidoho (2016), pp. 44–45.

does have the potential of redressing some inequalities of service access.³³ The study from Ghana points to the results achieved in service access and quality in one community benefitting from human rights-based support. The DanChurchAid study reveals limited results in redistribution of resources, but also underlines that “a clear value added of HRBA is its effects in attempting to re-establish social justice. . . .”³⁴

Agency, Advocacy, and Voice

In this chapter, no distinctions are made between the concepts of agency, advocacy, and voice simply because irrespective of the origins of these concepts they all relate to the human rights-based perspective of rights-holder demands being addressed to duty-bearers. A human rights-based approach presupposes that rights-holders are capable or are enabled and empowered to raise claims of rights fulfilment against duty-bearers. A human rights-based approach therefore envisages citizens as drivers of change. However, in many of the studies that address poverty and rights, rights-based agency takes place through local civil society groups or through intermediaries such as the community monitors mentioned in the study from Uganda above.

In their study from Cameroon, Duni et al. write about a paralegal program in the Mbororo community that facilitated a move from marginality and exploitative patron-client relations toward a “negotiated clientilism”, i.e. not the realization of ideal forms of participatory citizenship, but nevertheless a significant change.³⁵ In the same volume, Gledhill argues that it is not realistic to imagine that spontaneous bottom-up action of poorer citizens will provide significant change in a neoliberal order, but at the same time he argues there is everything to be said for measures that enhance the capacity to organize—not only to make demands, but also for these citizens to take greater control in the production of their identities and enhance public understanding of their lives and problems.³⁶

³³This is also the conclusion arrived at by Schmitz (2012). Schmitz reviews the local community work of Plan International: Schmitz reports results in the effectiveness of service delivery, in rights awareness and ownership, but not in addressing the “root causes”, whatever this means, of inequality, see pp. 523 and 534.

³⁴Critical Rights and Gender Consult (2017), p. 8. The importance of social justice as a feature of the human rights-based approach was also underlined by Hickey and Mitlin (2009) who contrast a human rights-based approach with Amartya Sen’s perception of rights reinforcement as a project of freedom with one of social justice: “Here we would differ from Sen by suggesting that rights can be most progressively linked to a broader project of social justice rather than of freedom.”, p. 227.

³⁵Duni et al. (2009), p. 63.

³⁶Gledhill (2009), pp. 43–44. Schmitz (2012) is also cautious in allocating change potential to rights-holders beyond the organizations representing them.

Two sets of learnings emanate from the various studies of rights implementation in the local context. First, in the context of endemic poverty, mobilization for rights always poses a challenge.³⁷ Organizational capacities are weak, local organizations fragmented or non-existent, and marginalized groups are without respect or self-respect, and in many cases located remotely. In Sano and Anyidoho's study, significant differences could be observed in the propensity of poor groups to complain compared to the non-poor ones.³⁸ In Destrooper's study from the Congo, a large gap exists between the empowerment rhetoric, the empowerment instrumentation, and the real implementation of empowerment.³⁹ What emerges clearly, however, is this: Empowerment strategies must therefore be realistic and contextual.

Why then discuss the perspective of agency and advocacy in a chapter dealing with rights and the SDGs? Undeniably, participation and accountability are integral concepts of a human rights-based approach—and participation efforts are mostly accompanied by efforts of social mobilization and empowerment. However, while empowerment processes to date do not seem very promising, new technologies may strengthen the prospects of advocacy and alter the conditions of participation. The advocacy ambitions of the human rights movement already combine with the social accountability efforts of governance actors,⁴⁰ but both of these efforts addressing participation, social monitoring and social mobilization may increasingly be influenced by the proliferation of the internet and by information and communication technology (ICT).

A research project, "Making all Voices Count", undertaken by the Institute of Development Studies in Sussex, UK, has just issued reports on the findings on appropriating technology for accountability. Some of the key findings are:

- Not all voices can be expressed via technology as only half of the world's population is online.
- Technologies can play decisive roles in improving services. Cheaper, quicker, simpler generation of real-time data by governments and by citizens can help target resources, resolve distributive conflicts and allow better decisions in the provision of public goods.
- Transparency, information or open data are not sufficient to generate accountability.
- Technologies can support social mobilization and collective action by connecting citizens.

³⁷This is not to argue against Simmons (2009), but rather to underscore that what is also prevalent in her study that mobilization necessitates organizational strength.

³⁸These differences occurred especially with respect to water, sanitation, and primary education in the poorest village. See Sano and Anyidoho (2016), p. 44.

³⁹Destrooper (2016), pp. 807 and 811.

⁴⁰Social accountability or demand-led governance is a concept used in the governance field. I have earlier written on the parallels and overlaps between social accountability and human rights, see: Sano (2015).

- Technologies can create new spaces for engagement between citizens and the state.
- Technologies can help empower citizens and strengthen their agency for engagement.
- The kinds of democratic deliberation needed to challenge systemic lack of accountability are rarely well-supported by technologies.
- Technologies alone do not foster the trusting relationship needed between governments and citizens, and within each group of actors.
- The capacities needed to transform governance relationships are developed offline, and in social and political processes, rather than by technologies.
- Technologies cannot overturn the social norms that underpin many accountability gaps.
- A deepening digital divide risks compounding existing exclusions.⁴¹

From a human rights perspective, and in relation to future SDG implementation, this research is valuable. The research puts some sobering conclusions to the tech optimists by pointing to that fact that new tech-enabled norms of self-service, self-help and crowdsourcing sit alongside the ascendance of the transnational tech giants that own infrastructures, algorithms and data on which e-governance work depends (p. 25). Yet the report also indicates new avenues of empowerment, participation and social mobilization. The report does not have in-depth reflections on how this may affect poorer groups, but it contains elements that can also influence these groups positively over time.

5 Conclusion

This chapter has examined how human rights and human rights-based approaches can contribute to poverty reduction, to social floors, and to equal access to services.

The main message of the analysis is that rather than being paralyzed by ominous paradigms of neoliberalism and by important trends of economic inequality within countries—which *is* an important factor—human rights scholarship could examine the evidence for positive change which also prevails in tandem with negative scenarios: in terms of reduction in poverty numbers and in terms of positive change in access to services brought about, *inter alia*, by human rights-based programming and by struggles for social justice. There is a need to learn from these experiences and to investigate how human rights and SDG efforts can join forces, also locally. The fact that many human rights debates are undertaken with a perspective on global, international, or national dimensions should not preclude an ambition or a curiosity as achievements or shortcomings locally.

⁴¹See McGee et al. (2018). See also Herringshaw (2018).

The social floor dimension, while not explicitly addressed here, has been referenced by way of the incipient discussions on universal basic income. As a vision it should not be disregarded. It is unfortunate, however, that human rights work in this context has been presented as that of being on a zombie path that would lead nowhere in terms of addressing economic insecurity. Such a pessimistic perspective does not adequately do justice to the struggles and organizational efforts that do take place locally where human rights-based approaches are being implemented, often under difficult circumstances.

In the quest to meet SDG 1, there is a call for more evidence-based work in the human rights domain, both qualitative and quantitative. Fulfilling this call may modify some of the prevailing pessimism by pointing constructively to avenues of collective action, participation and social mobilization that may certainly hold relevance and practicality to poorer groups in the context of ending poverty during the period leading up to 2030 when the present targets of the Sustainable Development Goals should be realized.

References

- Alkire S, Robles G (2015) Multidimensional poverty index 2015: brief methodological note and results. Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI), Oxford Department of International Development, University of Oxford
- Alston P (2017a) Report of the Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights. A/HRC/35/26
- Alston P (2017b) The Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty in his most recent report. Report of the Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights
- Birch K (2017) A research agenda for neoliberalism. Edward Elgar Publishers, Cheltenham
- Broberg M, Sano HO (2017) Strength and weaknesses in a human rights-based approach to international development. *Int J Human Rights*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2017.1408591>
- Chorev N, Babb S (2009) The crisis of neoliberalism and the future of international institutions: a comparison of the IMF and the WTO. *Ther Soc* 38:459–484
- Critical Rights and Gender Consult (2017) Documenting the effects of HRBA in development. Synthesis Report. Evaluation study for DanChurchAid
- Destrooper T (2016) Linking discourse and practice. The human rights-based approach to development in the Village Assaini Program in the Kongo Central. *Hum Rights Q* 38(3):787–813
- Dugard J (2014) Urban basic services, rights reality, and resistance. In: Langford M, Cousins B, Dugard J, Madlingozi T (eds) *Socio-economic rights in South Africa. Symbols or substance*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp 304–306
- Duni J, Fon R, Hickey S, Salihu N (2009) Exploring a political approach to rights-based development in North West Cameroon: from rights and marginality to citizenship and justice. In: Hickey S, Mitlin D (eds) *Rights-based approaches to development. Exploring the potentials and pitfalls*. Kumarian Press, Sterling, pp 63–64
- Easterly W (2003) IMF and World Bank structural adjustment programs and poverty. In: Dooley MP, Frankel JA (eds) *Managing currency crises in emerging markets*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, pp 361–391
- Easterly W (2013) *The tyranny of experts. Economists, dictators, and the forgotten rights of the poor*. Basic Books, New York

- Gledhill J (2009) The rights of the rich versus the rights of the poor. In: Hickey S, Mitlin D (eds) *Rights-based approaches to development. Exploring the potentials and pitfalls*. Kumarian Press, Sterling, pp 31–46
- Herringshaw V (2018) *Increasing citizen voice and government responsiveness: what does success really look like, and who decides?*. Institute of Development Studies, Research Report
- Hickey S, Mitlin D (eds) (2009) *Rights-based approaches to development. Exploring the potentials and pitfalls*. Kumarian Press, Sterling, VA
- Ismail Z (2015) *The rise of populism in Southern Africa's dominant party states*. OXPOL. The Oxford University Politics Blog
- Langford M, Cousins B, Dugard J, Madlingozi T (2014) *Socio-economic rights in South Africa. Symbols or substance?*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp 448–450
- McGee R, Edwards D, Anderson C, Hudson, H, Feruglio F (2018) *Appropriating technology for accountability: messages from making voices count*. Institute of Development Studies, Research Report
- Metcalf S (2017) *The Idea that swallowed the World*. The Guardian, 18 August 2017
- Milanovic B (2016) *Global inequality. A new approach for the age of globalization*. Belknap and Harvard University Press, Cambridge, pp 18–22
- Moyn S (2014) *A powerless companion: human rights in the age of neoliberalism*. *Law Contemp Probl* 77:147–169
- Moyn S (2018) *Human rights are not enough*. The Nation, 16 March 2018
- Mustaniemi-Laakso M, Sano HO (eds) (2017) *Human rights-based change. The institutionalization of economic and social rights*. Routledge, London
- Nowak M (2017) *Human rights or global capitalism. The limits of privatization, vol 1*. University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia
- OECD (2017) *Basic income as a policy option*. Available at <https://www.oecd.org/els/emp/Basic-Income-Policy-Option-2017.pdf>. Accessed 18 Apr 2018
- OHCHR (2018) *What is a human rights based approach*. Available at <http://hrbportal.org/faq/what-is-a-human-rights-based-approach>. Accessed 18 Apr 2018
- Ostry JD, Loungani P, Fuceri D (2016) *Neo-liberalism: oversold?* *Finance Dev* 52(2):38–41
- Oxfam (2017) *An Economy for the 99 Percent. Just 8 men own same wealth as half the world*. Oxfam Press Release, 16 January 2017. Available at <https://www.oxfam.org/en/pressroom/pressreleases/2017-01-16/just-8-men-own-same-wealth-half-world>. Accessed 18 Apr 2018
- Pogge T (ed) (2007) *Freedom from poverty as a human right. Who owes what to whom?* Oxford University Press, Oxford
- Sano HO (2015) *Social accountability in the World Bank. How does it overlap with human rights?* In: LaDawn H, Stryker R (eds) *Closing the rights gap. From human rights to social transformations*. University of California Press, Oakland, pp 219–236
- Sano HO, Anyidoho NA (2016) *The right to services and poverty. A case study from the Volta Region in Ghana. Matters of concern*. Human Rights Research Papers, the Danish Institute for Human Rights
- Sano HO, McInerney-Lankford S (2016) *Human rights and the post-2015 sustainable development goals. Reflections on challenges and opportunities*. *World Bank Legal Rev* 7:165–183
- Schmitz HP (2012) *A human rights-based approach (HRBA) in practice: evaluating NGO development efforts*. *Polity* 44(4):423–541
- Simmons B (2009) *Mobilizing for human rights. International law in domestic politics*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
- Vizard P (2006) *Poverty and human rights. Sen's capability perspective explored*. Oxford University Press, Oxford
- Weber H (2017) *Politics of leaving no one behind. Contesting the 2030 sustainable development goals*. *Globalization* 14(3):400
- World Bank (2018) *World development report of the World Bank*

Hans-Otto Sano is Director of Research at the Danish Institute for Human Rights and currently involved in three research projects at the Danish Institute for Human Rights: one on human rights-based approaches and poverty reduction, one on human rights and economics, and one on human rights research methods including how institutional theory can be applied in human rights research. Mr. Sano has worked earlier on subjects relating to governance and social accountability, on human rights indicators, and on the meaning and value added of human rights-based approaches. He has research experience from several countries in sub-Saharan Africa and from South Asia.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

