RIGHTS-BASED APPROACHES TO DEVELOPMENT: CONCEPTS, FOCUSES, AND LIMITATIONS

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of rights-based approaches to development in the last few decades have been a contended and complex process. The endorsement of 'rights-based development' by several major international organizations since the late 1990s has highlighted the importance of human rights rhetoric in international development and repositioned the development endeavor within greater accountability and participation lenses. In this sense, considering the ongoing significance of the topic, this paper aims to explore rights-based development's grounding concepts and focuses, while addressing some of its limitations, usually expressed in terms of its aspirational nature and the emphasis given to the role of states in bringing about development. In order to do so, a literature review will be employed, seeking to identify and evaluate the state of the art on the topic. By laying the foundations for a sophisticated understanding of rights-based development, this paper expects to foster further discussions on the role of rights in development.

Keywords: international development; rights-based development; human rights.

RESUMO

A emergência de abordagens de promoção de desenvolvimento basedas em direitos nas últimas décadas têm sido um processo contencioso e complexo. O endosso dado por diversas organizações internationais proeminentes ao 'desenvolvimento baseado em direitos' desde o final dos anos 1990 enfatizou a importância da retórica de direitos humanos no ramo do desenvolvimento internacional e reposicionou esforços nessa direção sob uma ótica de maior responsabilização e participação. Nesse sentido, considerando a atualidade e importância do tema, este trabalho busca explorar os conceitos e focos fundadores do desenvolvimento baseado em direitos, bem como seus limites, os quais são geralmente expressos

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em termos de sua natureza aspiracional e na ênfase dada ao papel dos Estados na promoção de desenvolvimento. Para tanto, uma revisão de literatura será empregada, buscando identificar e avaliar o estado da arte em torno do tema. Ao lançar as bases para um entendimento sofisticado do desenvolvimento baseado em direitos, este trabalho espera incentivar novas discussões a respeito do papel dos direitos no desenvolvimentoo.

Palavras-chave: desenvolvimento internacional; desenvolvimento baseado em direitos; direitos humanos.

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of rights-based approaches to development – or simply "rights-based development" (RBD) – in the last few decades has been a contended and complex process. By arguing that development cannot be understood solely through the lenses of economic progress, resource reallocation, and Gross Domestic Product (GDP) figures, nor can it be confined within the rigid boundaries of economic rationalization, RBD introduced development thinkers to a yet unseen comprehension of the phenomenon. Through a renewed integration of human rights principles with those of international development, RBD presented a view of development based around the centrality of people's rights – not only the traditional economic right involved in accessing markets, products, or services; but also all the numerous political, civil and other types of rights that are necessary to support an individual's exercise of its freedoms and agency. RBD's call for rights as an organizing principle of development challenged development thinking to consider a more multifaced approach, resulting in a potent movement of human rights rhetoric in the field; one that remains powerful to this day.

Such movement was reinforced via the endorsement of RBD by several major international actors, including multilateral organizations, regional and international NGOs, as well as development practitioners in both the global North and South. As it established itself as a legitimate approach, RBD found traction in the growing importance of human rights in the last few decades and was responsible for a repositioning of development actions within greater accountability and participation lenses. Through RBD's focus on rights, the expansion of people's freedoms and capacities became the ends – how development projects are supposed to be evaluated – and means – how development projects are supposed to be structured – of development (SEN, 1999, p. 35), which represented a revolutionary shift of focus considering the prevailing mentality of the 1990s, usually associated with unilateral aid efforts, through which donors identified immediate needs and provided basic goods to the poorest.

However, as the rhetoric of rights started to assume the forefront of development, and categorizations of "duty-bearers" and "right-holders" became mainstream, RBD's loopholes also became visible. Among the main critiques in the literature targeting RBD, it is argued that the normative content of rights-based approaches – here understood as its idealization of what development ought to achieve – can turn the development endeavor into an 'aspiration', presenting the danger of confining development to mere rhetoric about claims, duties, and institutions, while downsizing the multiple political dimensions of supporting change in a complex world. In parallel, as national states are identified as the central actors responsible for the enforcement of the human rights under its jurisdiction, several commentators maintain that RBD can end up blind to the limitations of state power in the midst of a globalized world, failing to tap into alternative pathways to the practical implementation of human rights.

In this sense, the goal of this paper is to explore the framework of concepts and focuses that surround rights-based approaches to development without losing sight of the main limitations associated. We will do so by identifying and evaluating the core ideas available in the literature on the topic, hoping to provide a basic understanding of what it means to adopt the lens of rights when it comes to supporting positive change; and most importantly, how is it possible to adopt a RBD stance without losing sight of the loopholes it potentially entails.

Rights-based approaches to development: between origins, definitions, and applications

Defining an approach to development is certainly no easy task. To define is to make choices of what is deemed meaningful and irrelevant, which raises serious questions considering the numerous voices in the literature (CORNWALL;NYAMU-MUSEMBI, 2004; TSIKATA, 2004, p. 130; KINDORNAY; RON; CARPENTER, 2012, p. 477; LANGFORD, 2015, p. 777; MILLER; VENEKLASEN; CLARK, 2005, p. 31) pointing out the existence of multiple rights-based approaches to development, each with its own conceptualization, ethics, and implementation disputes (UVIN, 2007, p. 603; MANZO, 2003, p. 437).

Nevertheless, it seems evident that the fusion of 'rights' and 'development' was a uniquely interesting process that took place at the end of the twentieth century, initially articulated in development circles of the global North (KINDORNAY; RON; CARPENTER, 2012, p. 476) and reinforced through the greater participation of southern countries in the United Nations (ROBINSON, 2001; as cited by CORNWALL; NYAMU-

MUSEMBI, 2004, p. 1422). This process was in part a reaction to a long-lasted movement of prioritization of economic growth, production, and other economy-related factors when it comes to assessing the success of development processes. In this formula, development equals economic growth. Sen (1999, p. 18), in its foundational work of rights-based approaches, propose that the comprehension of development processes must instead be based on people's freedoms, resulting in an agency-centered view of development in which what really matters is how meaningfully people can exercise their rights and live the kind of life they value.

Sen (1999, p. 25) claims that such approach does not reject the relevance of economic development in the overall improvement of people's lives, but enriches the discussion by proposing that even the economic aspects of development must be understood in relation to the repercussions they create in the realization of other types of rights, namely political, civil, and others. Through this perspective, issues like poverty are understood not only in terms of its economic dimension – a lowness of income, for example – but also in terms of the deprivation of capacities that the poor access to financial resources result in (SEN, 1999, p. 87).

This overcoming of economic growth as the standpoint of development is also profoundly linked to the significant legitimacy of the human rights agenda in the 1990s (UVIN, 2007, p. 599), as well as the historical discussions surrounding the construction of the 'Right to Development' (OHCHR, 1986) – which stood on the compelling argument posed by the global South that the process of development is a right in itself (SENGUPTA, 2000, p. 567). The birth of RBD, in this sense, can be seen as an attempt to integrate human rights principles with those of poverty alleviation as a way to counter some of the limitations conveyed by traditional views of development (KINDORNAY; RON; CARPENTER, 2012, p. 476). This movement pushed organizations and practitioners to reflect on the possible correlations between human rights and development work.

However, more than a claim for a more 'complete' perspective of development, the embracement of human rights appears to require a fundamental reconfiguration of the ends and means of development (SEN, 1999, p. 35). Standing mainly on the theoretical contributions of the Amartya Sen (1999), RBD proponents argued that if development is to be genuinely participatory – that is, with absolute involvement of those who will benefit from it – a Right to Development must accept participation as a cornerstone (SENGUPTA, 2000, p. 568). Simultaneously, standing

on the understanding that development's end goal is the expansion of people's capacities, rights-based approaches questioned the prevalence of GDP and other related economic indicators when it comes to assessing development policy success (SENGUPTA, 2000, p. 568). Essentially, RBD questioned both the objectives – a radical shift of focus from providing 'basic goods' to enabling 'basic freedoms' – and processes of development. As Kindornay, Ron and Carpenter (2012, p. 476) point out, rights-based development experts began urging the development industry to:

> Assess human rights conditions before formulating their plans and projects; identify rights-holders and duty bearers in prospective projects; ensure local participation in project planning and implementation; create and strengthen mechanisms of citizen-government accountability; reduce discrimination against marginalized groups; focus on development processes, in addition to outcomes; and, most importantly, engage in local and international advocacy efforts to promote the rights of vulnerable groups.

Despite the difficulties associated with trying to specify the exact moment in which RBD emerged as a systemic approach to development (KINDORNAY; RON; CARPENTER, 2012, p. 477; CORNWALL; NYAMU-MUSEMBI, 2004, p. 1420), or the historical conditions that paved the way for its appearance (CORNWALL; NYAMU-MUSEMBI, 2004, p. 1423), a fact remains: various prominent international organizations have been standing on the legitimacy of human rights rhetoric in international discourse to evoke the language of rights in the elaboration of their approaches to development since the late 1990s (UVIN, 2007).

In this regard, as some authors (TSIKATA, 2004, p. 132; KINDORNAY; RON; CARPENTER, 2012, p. 478) indicate, the broad dissemination, legitimation, and deepening of rights-based approaches in the development landscape was a United Nations-led movement. Within the UN System, Kindornay, Ron, and Carpenter (2012, p. 479) show that three agencies – the UN International Children's Fund (UNICEF), the UN Development Programme (UNDP), and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) – were key champions of the rights-based approach in its early implementation. The UNICEF (1997, p. 6), for instance, as early as 1997, declared that its approach to promoting children's well-being would be grounded in the promotion of the human rights contained in the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child; which, in turn, openly embraced the inalienability of human dignity as a fundamental right (UN, 1989). Similarly, the OHCHR and the UNDP followed the trend: Cornwall and Nyamu-Musembi (2004, p. 1426) affirm that the UNDP, in partnership with the OHCHR, strongly

relied on a rights approach in its work regarding building up governance institutions. The grounding on rights appears to have also branched towards programming practices: development interventions had to focus on enabling people to realize their potentials and exercise their agencies. These movements are visible, for instance, in how remarkably vocal the UNDP (2002, p. 1) is in its discussion of the impacts of a rights-based approach to development programming:

> A human rights perspective calls for enhanced attention to the phase of assessment and analysis providing, among others, full understanding of the legal framework of a country, and the factors that create and perpetuate discrimination and social exclusion and hinder people from realising their potential.

The cascade of human rights rhetoric in the UN culminated in the 2003 Human Rights Based Approach to Development Cooperation Towards a Common Understanding Among UN Agencies (UN, 2003, p. 1). Such agreement represents a solid reference point to the comprehension of the trend towards RBD, as it seems to be the first formal document to broadly and explicitly adhere to a rights-based approach to development in the UN. It states that all development-related activities undertaken by any agency functioning under the UN System is to be structured in line with the advancement of the principles contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and its associated conventions. The document was a landmark, launching a powerful movement of rights-based rhetoric both within and outside the UN framework, affecting development groups in different scales and encouraging a substantial shift in development practices in general (KINDORNAY; RON; CARPENTER, 2012, p. 477).

The RBD wave quickly affected other major multilateral agencies, such as the World Bank. The Bank (1998, p. 2), for instance, reclaimed the platform of human dignity to reconfigure the foundations of its approach to development since the late 1990s. Although less energetic in its statements, it has largely adopted the human rights rhetoric in its work related to poverty alleviation and the so-called 'good' governance agenda (CORNWALL; NYAMU-MUSEMBI, 2004, p. 1426; UVIN, 2007, p. 600).

Furthermore, the RBD trend profoundly affected international and local NGOs: given their natural vulnerability to donor incentives, NGOs quickly realized the need to become familiar with the new 'rights talk' in order to survive in the development industry (KINDORNAY; RON; CARPENTER, 2012, p. 488; MANZO, 2003, p. 451; CORNWALL; NYAMU-MUSEMBI, 2004, p. 1429). Oxfam America seems to be one of the leading examples: alongside CARE and other NGOs, Oxfam has

been openly concerned with the nuances of rights-based development to designing, implementing and evaluating development projects since the early 1990s (RAND; WATSON, 2007, p. 38). In fact, the early movements towards RBD within the UN system were largely accompanied by NGOs. These organizations have responded in various degrees depending on their ability or willingness to implement changes (KINDORNAY; RON; CARPENTER, 2012, p. 489). Ranging from reformulations in accounting and reporting procedures, passing through shifts in programming approaches, and reaching global transformations in project delivery and objectives, changes have been broad and noticeable (KINDORNAY; RON; CARPENTER, 2012, p. 489).

In practical terms, these transformations usually translated into an increased emphasis on advocacy work and more progress-based capacity building initiatives (KINDORNAY; RON; CARPENTER, 2012, p. 492; CORNWALL; NYAMU-MUSEMBI, 2004, p. 1430; MOHAN; HOLLAND, 2001, p. 184), rather than output-based ones. By standing on RBD's platform, NGOs have been creating mechanisms for key actors – mainly governments – to remain accountable with their human rights obligations, while supporting empowering-type initiatives in a variety of settings (CORNWALL; NYAMU-MUSEMBI, 2004, p. 1429).

In addition, Manzo (2003, p. 452) demonstrates that concerns around accountability were central in the transition towards RBD in the context of NGOs: not only NGO-led initiatives started to focus on holding states increasingly accountable for human rights violations, but also more attention was given to NGOs' role in minimizing the effects of these violations, not to mention a novel emphasis on aspects of 'internal' accountability, especially as these actors became better funded and professionalized.

In conclusion, notwithstanding the multiple uses and dimensions, Cornwall and Nyamu-Musembi (2004, p. 1430) argue that a small set of common principles appear to prevail over the complexity of RBD's debates, providing a robust framework to an attempt to conceptualize RBD and venture into its potential practical applications. By analysing the approach in terms of its normative content – that is, in terms of the visions it projects about what development 'ought to be' – the authors (CORNWALL; NYAMU-MUSEMBI, 2004, p. 1430) maintain that most organizations that stand on the RBD platform seem to employ it to promote a shift of focus from "identifying and meeting needs" to "enabling people to recognize and exercise rights". Standing on the well-known dichotomy between "duty-bearers" and "rights-holders", most strategies encompass two fronts of capacity building: reinforce states' –

and progressively non-state actors as well – capacity to materialise rights and remain accountable to its obligations, on one hand, while supporting citizens' capacity to claim those very rights, on the other (CORNWALL; NYAMU-MUSEMBI, 2004, p. 1430). In this sense, from a conceptual standpoint, the essential components of RBD include the fundamental linkage to the rhetoric of rights, greater accountability on the part of duty-bearers, increased empowerment and participation of right-holders, as well as an enhanced focus on the most vulnerable groups (MILLER; VENEKLASEN; CLARK, 2005, p. 31; TSIKATA, 2004, p. 130; MOHAN; HOLLAND, 2001, p. 183; DAVIS, 2009, p. 180).

RBD as an "aspiration"

There seems to be a fundamental problem with translating development problems into claims, duties, and institutional mechanisms: development becomes 'aspirational'. The normative content of RBD leads to the false premise that development can somehow rest on clear and fixed legal basis, which does not capture the intrinsically political and shifting nature of obligations created by human rights (UVIN, 2007, p. 603), and hardly considers the profound repercussions of power dynamics to the practical realisation of those rights. Indeed, rights can be defined and reframed by powerful interests; they can mean different things to different actors, different contexts; they can be stretched out, compressed, bent, or twisted. Although some voices in the literature (CORNWALL; NYAMU-MUSEMBI, 2004, p. 1416; DAVIS, 2009, p. 176; LANGFORD, 2015, p. 779; TSIKATA, 2004, p. 131) raise the argument that RBD can foster considerations about power and structural impediments in development work, as it encourages a recharacterization of the poor as rights-holders instead of passive recipients of assistance, there seems to be a permanent risk that assuming a rights-based approach results in little more than a number of appealing statements of intent about "things that it would be nice to achieve, or duties we would like to assume one day, without setting out either the concrete procedures for actually achieving those rights or methods of avoiding the slow and dirty enterprise of politics" (UVIN, 2007, p. 603).

In fact, a major source of concern to substantial portion of the literature (DAVIS, 2009, p. 179; UVIN, 2007; TSIKATA, 2004; NELSON; DORSEY, 2018, p. 101; MILLER; VENEKLASEN; CLARK, 2005, p. 31) analysing RBD's foundations and practical implementation lies in the realization that the promotion of human rights is a task largely situated outside of the legal realm. This argument may sound counter-intuitive at first sight but can be quickly understood if we consider two

complementary perspectives. First, there seems to be no way around the fact that all international human rights documents are a consequence of political negotiation (WALTZ, 2002, p. 446). This poses the questions of 'who decides what constitutes a right', with all the multiple repercussions that stem from it, and more dramatically 'whose rights count' (MILLER; VENEKLASEN; CLARK, 2005, p. 36; MOHAN; HOLLAND, 2001, p. 190), which invites us to ponder on the intrinsically political – and therefore 'contextual' – origins of human rights. Second, it appears that the translation of any complex development problem into the rhetoric of rights is ultimately a process of 'simplification' in which extremely relevant dimensions of that problem – social, economic, political, cultural, environmental, and so on – are downsized or ignored in favor of a legalistic view (MILLER; VENEKLASEN; CLARK, 2005, p. 33) capable of accommodating categorizations such as 'legal' and 'illegal'; 'duty-bearer' and 'right-holder'. The simplification of development challenges may, in turn, hinder organizations' and practitioners' ability to explore alternative pathways to solutions other than the institutional/legalistic one (DAVIS, 2009, p. 179), while dangerously masking the multiple interests and power dynamics that are commonly involved in current complex development issues (MOHAN; HOLLAND, 2001, p. 192). In this sense, Miller, VeneKlasen, and Clark (2005, p. 33) eloquently point out that:

> While working with laws and legal systems is critical, it has become clear that narrow legal approaches usually fail to expand the scope of rights or appreciably strengthen accountability and capacity to deliver resources and justice. Equally important, these approaches do little to develop people's sense of themselves as citizens and subjects of rights, or their capacity to engage with and reshape power.

Uvin (2007, p. 604), in parallel, acutely illustrates the limitations of a legalistic standpoint when stating that: "if a rights-based approach to development means empowering marginalised groups, challenging oppression and exclusion, and changing power relations, much of this lies outside the legal arena, falling squarely in the political realm".

Under this lens, RBD's formal content presents the danger of 'emptying' development and human right challenges of its political facet, ultimately contributing to the maintenance, not the transformation, of the *status quo* (UVIN, 2007, p. 603; TSIKATA, 2004; MOHAN; HOLLAND, 2001, p. 193). As Tsikata (2004, p. 131) insightfully points out, RBD approaches may end up being nothing more than a language twist in development: an attractively disguised presentation of 'old wine' in 'new bottles' (UVIN, 2007, p. 599; KINDORNAY; RON; CARPENTER, 2012,

p. 479). In sum, the adoption of a rights-based approach when tackling development challenges may obscure the crudeness of real-world power dynamics and highly political agendas behind the contingency of rights, laws, and institutional mechanisms. To stand on the legitimacy of human rights in international development without expressly dealing with issues of justice, power, representation, and participation – issues that inhabit the world of the facts, not the world of ideas – when it comes to its practical implementation implies a paltry consideration of the complexities of supporting change. The real engines of change remain clouded behind pretty words about rights, duties, and institutions written on a piece paper.

RBD, state-centrism, and globalization

Another primary source of criticism lies within the central role states play in RBD. As the main duty-bearer regarding the human rights of individuals under its jurisdiction, states assume the forefront in the realization of rights and development by extension (CORNWALL; NYAMU-MUSEMBI, 2004, p. 1417; MOHAN; HOLLAND, 2001, p. 184), which end up setting the tone for how accountability and participation are to be implemented under RBD's logic.

Nonetheless, the focus on governments and other 'regular' channels of power ignores that, in practice, most poor people have little to no access to the legal mechanisms and institutional apparatus that might enforce their rights. Not to mention that the interface between the multiple legal systems governing people's access to entitlements makes the process of recognizing and claiming rights undeniably complex (CORNWALL; NYAMU-MUSEMBI, 2004, p. 1418; MILLER; VENEKLASEN; CLARK, 2005, p. 35) and contextual, both within and outside state jurisdiction. The problem, as it seems, is not precisely the predominance of state responsibility in the realization of rights under RBD, but the remarkable lack of emphasis given to the obligations of non-states and transnational actors in this regard. As Manzo (2003, p. 451) argues, RBD tends to confine non-state actors' obligations to a moral, not legal, dimension. Moral obligations, however, cannot be the object of claims under international law, which only accentuate non-state actors' inability when it comes to enforcing rights in practice.

Furthermore, RBD advocates hardly consider the implications of handing over the responsibility for human rights' enforcement to governments stained by corruption; or authoritarian/non-democratic states. While analysing the viability of human rights-based approaches to development in the African context, Mohan and Holland (2001, p.

193) conclude that "by handling the primary responsibility for defending rights to unaccountable and authoritarian states the process does little to challenge the power structures which may have precipitated rights abuses in the first place". In line with the concern previously explored that the rights agenda may privilege the interests of the most powerful, this argument imposes considerations about the contextual applicability of RBD and its capacity to reinforce unjust structures of power and domination.

All these considerations assume dramatic contours as we consider the paradox of state power and effectiveness in the midst of a globalised world: while RBD puts countless duties on the shoulders of states and trusts in its power to realize people's rights, globalization entails rather the weakening of states' capabilities to secure and enhance the economic and social rights of their citizens (MANZO, 2003, p. 440). As Van Tuijl (2000, p. 618; as cited by MANZO, 2003, p. 440) sharply argues, one of globalization's most significant implications is precisely that "the responsibility for the enforcement human rights cannot be left to states alone". This argument considers the decline of state autonomy in the face of global economic rules that shackle national policies (MANZO, 2003, p. 441) as well as the reduced level of political institutionalization observed especially in poor developing countries (Huntington, 1965, p. 394; as cited by MANZO, 2003, p. 442) – exactly the ones in which human rights violations seem to present its most nefarious facet. And yet, the burden of carrying out human rights remains largely attributed to states. In this sense, Manzo (2003, p. 442) points out the need to question RBD state-centrism as new global actors – multinational corporations, INGOs, and others – are now exerting greater influence in the global human rights arena.

In other words, there seems to be blindness within RBD to alternative pathways to the realization of rights, which can prove to be more effective, given the limitations of states and governments especially in the context of poor countries and vulnerable communities.

CONCLUSION

If the goal of the development enterprise is development itself, each of the multiple approaches that populate the international arena will present different pathways to this end goal. The real challenge for development organizations and practitioners, as well as those interested in comprehending development phenomenons with a certain degree of sophistication, is to construct an understanding of each one of these approaches that is robust enough to evidence the set of assumptions and

loopholes that necessarily pervade them. This type of understanding, in turn, allows us to keep sight of the issues associated with these different ways of acting in the world and strategically draw from their strengths to optimize our chances to facilitate meaningful positive change.

When it comes to assessing RBD's surrounding concepts, focuses, and limitations, the current body of literature appears to indicate a certain number of central ideas. Indeed, rights-based approaches offer valuable routes to the reconfiguration of development work, emphasizing the need to look beyond the narrowness of simplistic overlooks that privilege economic growth or the simple transfer of resources to those in need. Instead, RBD argues for the importance of building up states' and citizens' capacities to materialize human rights, while forcing international organizations and development practitioners to reflect on the real meaning of accountability, empowerment, and participation in development programming and implementation. As the expansion of people's freedoms and capacities becomes the ends and means of development, RBD invites us to question the traditional roles of the development industry – including its assessment standards – and to ponder on the real meaning of respecting human rights in development work. There seems to be no way around the fact that these ideas offer valuable advancements to development theory, paving the way for more holistic views of development processes. RBD's contributions to the field must, therefore, be celebrated and preserved.

On the other hand, the rhetoric of rights has its downsides: development may end up trapped between fruitless discussions about rights that fail to enter the real world and the contingency of state power in the context of a globalized world. In other words, blindly embracing RBD leads to a particular framing of the world that may obscure crucial aspects of it, hindering our ability to promote positive change in particular contexts.

Finally, considering the ongoing importance of RBD and its current legitimacy, this paper hopes to provide a basic framework for further studies on the topic, facilitating the advancement of the knowledge about promoting positive and meaningful change through a human rights lens.

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