Realizing a vision for transformative development

Right to Development Book launch and Author roundtable
Monday, 9 December 2013, New York, USA

Unofficial meeting note

Book Launch

The Assistant Secretary-General, on behalf of the High Commissioner for Human Rights reflected on the elaboration of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the adoption of the Declaration on the Right to Development, as presenting a transformative vision of development for all. The High Commissioner highlighted some of today's challenges and obstacles to development, such as the threat of climate change, the inability to access medicines, the multiple global crises, the issue of displacement, the rise of unemployment and the persistence of discrimination. The launch of the book Realizing the Right to Development aims to clarify the role of the right to development in re-designing global development efforts and to place this right at the centre of advocacy for a sustainable development agenda that is respectful of all human rights.

Panellists noted that the size of this publication is a sheer representation of the magnitude of the discussion on the right to development over the past 25 years. They highlighted the requirement for international cooperation on the Right to Development as a new focus in this book and noted that identifying and removing the obstacles to development was crucial and in fact less expensive for States than donating a percentage of their GDP to development cooperation. Panellists and participants named political/financial instability, corruption, globalization and climate change as major obstacles to development - most commonly in rural areas - and stressed the problem of competing regimes that undercut international cooperation. The issue of lobbying was highlighted, noting that compromises are often refused for fear that competitors will prevail.

Panellists further pointed to the issue of hyper-commodification, especially with regard to knowledge. How the right to development is delivered depends not only on domestic government structures, but also on international structures and on the issue of control and use of knowledge. This was highlighted as the most important impediment to development in the context of access to life-saving drugs. With regard to agriculture, the growing monopolies over seeds and knowledge were noted and with regard to carbon mechanisms, the failure of technology transfer was stressed. Not enough is being done to ensure democratization and active dissemination of knowledge worldwide.

The timing of this publication was considered very appropriate by panellists, given the unprecedented systemic crisis society is facing today and with regard to the ongoing post-2015 discussion. It was pointed out that the right to development has been derailed
by political debate, conceptual confusion and lack of integration into governmental and developmental practice. This publication will finally clarify what is meant by ‘development’ in the Declaration and draw attention to an alternative vision of society, where both the causes and consequences of lack of development are addressed. The utility of this book will be demonstrated by the serious scholarship it contains and by its direct approach to key issues, offering concepts and evidence for rethinking government policies, bilateral and international cooperation, bringing the right to development closer to reality than rhetoric.

Finally, panellists referred to the vulnerability of some countries to external decisions and noted the duty of States, as highlighted in the Declaration, to ensure a social and international order which guarantees that the subjects of development can make their own decisions. The issue of accountability both at the domestic and international levels was regarded as vital for establishing a participatory process for tracking mechanisms of progress.

In the ensuing discussion, participants highlighted the potential for human rights to serve as a link between conflict, peace and development. The need to bring development processes closer to the human rights architecture was pointed out along with the need to offer incentives for institutions to shift their thinking to the right to development agenda. In concluding the discussion, it was noted that all poverty today is entirely avoidable, but that we cannot wait for growth or expect that development assistance will fill the enormous inequality gaps. Measuring progress to eliminate world poverty needs to be left to independent experts and independent impact assessments should be employed when treaties are negotiated.

Author Roundtable 1

Through the publication authors revealed the many different dimensions of the right to development, highlighted the principles of the new approach to development and examined the relationship between the Declaration and other relevant documents, noting that the Declaration challenged the concept of centering development on markets and not people. The publication further provides tools for the international community to advance practical implementation of the right to development and to help countries increase their capacity for development through cooperation. Authors further stressed the need to mobilize civil society on the right to development and to highlight the negative impact of underdevelopment. Mainstreaming this right at the national and international level would serve to integrate its principles into development policies. The right to development is underscored by the need for justice at the national and international levels, international solidarity and the duty to cooperate. In a globalized, interdependent world with interconnected crises, a progressive approach would adopt a nuanced view of international solidarity and cooperation which addresses the needs of all people, while paying due regard to the particular vulnerabilities of people in developing countries. Participants stressed the need to incentivize industries to participate in the discussion on the RTD and the unacceptability of conditionality. The overarching paradigm of the RTD and its international dimension give it the potential to fill the accountability gaps across the spectrum, particularly in global governance.
Authors drew attention to the need to pursue a new agenda and mobilize new actors on the right to development, most notably human rights organizations. They further highlighted the importance of recognizing and including planetary boundaries in assessments of the right to development, with a view to following a non-carbon path to development which would lead to equitable results. In this regard, international cooperation is failing to instigate effective action, which could be accomplished by incentivizing green technology. With reference to the clean development mechanism, authors noted its insufficiency for securing human rights and called for the right to development to establish effective safeguards both on mitigation and adaptation. Authors further highlighted the indivisibility of human rights and noted the dilemmas governments are facing with regard to intellectual property rights that put obstacles to accessing life-saving medicines. Civil society pressures can urge States to consider TRIPS flexibilities so as to improve access to HIV treatment, an issue that has fallen out of the table in the post-2015 agenda. Authors noted that the right to development is not only a right for individuals but also for peoples and stressed the need for their active participation in conceiving the meaning and implementation of development. The rationale behind establishing the essential criteria for promoting this right and the tools to measure progress towards its realization was explained with emphasis on the need to assess the collective obligation of States and identify how they can better function together. In conclusion, institutions such as the WTO and issues like access to drugs and intellectual property rights were recognized as more consequential for development than ODA, highlighting the necessity to reform multilateral institutions so as to provide better entry points for the Right to Development.