

Why Human Rights is to be Seen in the Realm of Political Action

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Theme: [History](#)

Global Research, October 31, 2010

31 October 2010

-We will succeed inasmuch as we display the capacity to mobilize collectively behind human rights as a political goal independent-of and often opposed-to the goals that motivate the state and/or the market.

-Political action and activism are badly undervalued in our community of professionals and intellectuals. It would seem that in it, pretending is more important than being.

The symptoms

1. In a mood of 'active pessimism', our peers too often go for the status-quo and procrastinate; the best known way to do that is to get involved in what has been called 'paralysis in analysis'.

2. Not that the above matters too much, the way things are right now. Why? Because our political leaders are more surrounded by publicists and image makers than by development thinkers. As a result, in an effort to manipulate rather than to solve, they too often try to dress their lies or half truths with the robes of the full truth. (Do not overlook the fact that, in order to lie, one has to know the truth).

-If only this lying from our self-serving politicians would cause no harm to human rights...

3. The main problem lies less in the policies the political establishment eventually comes-up with than in the processes that lead to carrying out these policies. Public policies are not simply items on a menu that policy makers pick and choose. Rather, they are first cooked-up by numerous political actors and must then be implemented and sustained over time. At each stage of the process, each of these political actors brings his/her personal interests to the table and is pressured by others as they defend their own respective interests. The quality of the outcomes in the policymaking process thus depends as much on how these different actors interact as on the merits per-se of the policy being promoted; it is the political and the economic context that ultimately shapes both the opportunities and the constraints in its implementation. Therefore, to put it differently, the issue is not only with the nature of the interventions pursued by the state ("producing", "regulating", or "distributing"), but also with the institutions that constitute the state, i.e., their incentives, the rules that govern their day-to-day functioning and -in our case- their till-now absent human rights accountability....." (E. Stein and M. Tommasi, Interamerican Development Bank)

4. Politics also influences how decision-makers use evidence. It should come as no surprise to you that they can and do ignore evidence –notably, in our case, the evidence of ongoing human rights (HR) violations. Moreover, the roles they play in policy making depend on specific moments or windows of opportunity –politics is always time-bound; there is no in-temporal politics.

5. For this reader, it is not merely questioning whether policies are (or end-up-being) pro-HR, but about opening formal political processes in which claim holders use a political approach with an accent on power analyses so as to promote a firm pro-HR and pro-democracy strategy.

-Hence, using the HR-based framework, claim holders are collectively empowered to exact accountability from duty bearers. Ergo, accountability without people's voice and influence is nonsensical.

-Remember: In HR work we call for direct democracy, including a) the collective action that historically has allowed poor and excluded groups to make their voices heard; b) the way in which the-condition-of-being-relatively-powerless can become internalized; and c) the ability to negotiate and influence decisions by engaging with the political system. (D. Green)

6. But beware, just bringing-up the political origins of the long-drawn-out disregard for human rights from a historical perspective to explain the current state of affairs is necessary-but-not-sufficient as a political input in HR work. Additionally, opposing-truth-to-power remains the ultimate cornerstone to succeed in our work. We thus have to understand power –including our own! ...and that is political. (D. Walker)

7. The powerful take their power for granted, as if they had been born with it....and that is political. The three key questions this raises are: Do they have that power by themselves or because we give it to them? Without us, would they really have any power? Are we then not the powerful, since it is us who confer that power to them? Food for thought here.

8. The Neoliberal Era we live-in inherited its transcendental values from the previous era of Capitalism; these values have persisted to the extent that they are not even discussed or questioned –especially as relates to certain rights of individuals such as the right to private property and what comes with it, i.e., the market economy and its excesses, marginalization, the lack of equality in front of the law... But, even if for now a winner, neoliberalism, is dying –no matter how much its proponents try to keep it alive.

The latter proponents will one day have to pay dearly for the trickle-down-redistribution-fiasco they tricked us into believing. A course correction of a-turn-mistakenly-taken by humanity is a must!

9. Actually, neoliberalism is perhaps the worst explanatory system of the world we live in. *** To survive, the neoliberal myth of progress has for decades now had to take-on the onslaught of the news about appalling social outcomes, the deterioration of the environment, of countries' debt... Neoliberalism is (and has been) clearly useless as a global analytical tool and, as such, has probably distorted history. There simply are realities that stubbornly resist its interpretations. It is ultimately its ambition that will bring it to its feet. The toolbox of Adam Smith and David Riccardo is not made to explain the world with its uneven power relations and the conflicts the same bring about.

-More than what we think, ideologies are alive and well, despite the current rhetoric about their death.

10. The central question though is not only to end the grip of neoliberalism, but also to put in place the HR-based system that will follow. For now, a mid-term strategy for this is missing, primarily because this requires a confrontation between social forces the world over.

The actors and the actions

11. We often call on civil society as our strategic partners in HR work. What we call civil society is a cultural and social (more than a political) construct born over many decades. Now, to get actively involved in HR work, civil society organizations partnering with us need to adopt the political stand we are talking about here; some already have, some not yet.

12. It is evident to me that, for HR to become entrenched, civil society organizations taking up HR work have to shed those 'recurring errors of interpretation' we have seen them falling into over-and-over again –and I am not saying this is easy. The turn-around process will require a favorable breeding ground so that the faulty perceptions people bring with them from very early-on and from previous work experiences can be changed. Therein lies our challenge.

13. We can simply no longer be bogged down with the reformist attitudes of many civil society organizations somehow linked to the motivations of the more formal, mainstream institutions of politics and of the state that lead them to adopt a 'sanitized' role in the realm of civil societies. The normative expectations of those civil society organizations and their dubious buy-ins in projects of the prevailing top-down system should be a warning call for us in the HR movement. In the realm of HR, we need political unity and consensus among progressive civil society organizations.

-Currently, manifest divisions exist that are marked by different political allegiances detracting from the potential collective strength civil society could have.

14. Civil society organizations are to both reflect and respond to the contingencies in the prevailing global and local political environment. They have to visualize the possibilities for their HR action in such an environment –and the HR framework provides the political vision for that. (N. George)

15. As this Reader has said many times, HR relies on direct civic engagement in exacting accountability (much beyond voting). This, since the electoral route represents perhaps the weakest route to accountability. It therefore becomes a must that accountability be transferred so that the collective will of communities can be heeded (see direct democracy above). Accountability without people's voice and influence is nonsensical. *****

-The attributes of accountability are: calling those responsible to account (making them answerable); requiring accountable action (may include sanctions); obtaining redress/compensation, when due.

16. Just to remind ourselves: HR accountability consists of notions that are central to justice such as equity, power...and addressing the impunity of the powerful. ***** As such, it has to generate information to be held and used by claim holders, to be fed back to duty bearers and to be used in advocacy, in negotiating key issues and in demanding government and non-governmental actors' responsiveness.

-When emphasizing only social and not political accountability, we can rightfully be accused of not taking the political determinants of HR violations seriously enough.

17. In this sense, citizens engagement via public commissions and public hearings are but two ways HR work can proceed and has proceeded. Moreover, an import task in exacting HR accountability is to involve traditional local leaders, as well as local elected representatives.

18. Bottom line: As HR activists, our challenge is not only to remedy the various political problems in the prevailing top-down/HR insensitive decision-making, but also -through human rights learning activities- to actively combat the widespread political apathy and/or resistance to change when it comes to HR.

19. Because acting politically is the way to reach 'ground zero' in HR work, as activists, we have to look for new engagements with progressive political parties and civil society organizations and with labor unions and women and youth movements to really create a durable political front for HR.

Perhaps the biggest challenge here...

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This text was adapted from A. Gomez, Tiempo de Descuento, Editorial El Fin de la Noche, Buenos Aires, 2009; Health Insights, IDS, Issue 78, Oct 2009; Development in Practice, 19:8, 2009; and C. Fuentes, Adan en Eden, Alfaguara, Santillana Ediciones Generales, Buenos Aires, 2009.

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