

Countering Violence Against Children in the Philippines: Positive RBA Practice Examples from Plan

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Positive rights-based approach (RBA) development practice examples tend to be under-reported. If documented and shared more widely, such examples could become powerful resources for practitioners, policy makers and academics alike. Much experimental RBA practice focusses on child rights. It is therefore no coincidence that the chapter underlying this policy brief draws from the experiences of the child-focussed development NGO Plan. Plan is strongly committed to child rights-based approaches (CRBAs), as it expresses in its vision on change called 'child-centred community development'.

The chapter provides a critical analysis of interventions on violence against children (VAC) undertaken by Plan Philippines and supported by Plan Netherlands. In line with the seminal 2006 UN World Report on Violence Against Children (the Pinheiro Report), and with the contents and principles of CRBA, Plan sees violence against children as a child rights violation that needs to be ended structurally. The state is the primary duty bearer in this regard. In the case example, Plan Philippines deliberately engaged the state to perform in that role.

The reviewed project practice concentrated on four main areas of intervention: rights-based birth registration (which is a crucial basic condition for child – and child rights – protection), anti-trafficking, child abuse and juvenile justice. There was a clear display of the main features of CRBA across this practice, evolving around taking the UN Convention on the Right of the Child as a main framework for action and set of substantive goals to pursue; working by the general principles of the Convention (especially non-discrimination and participation); and striving for structural solutions brought about by combined efforts of governmental and non-governmental actors. This was underpinned by a relatively solid evidence base in the form of studies and reports on VAC in the Philippines, and through gathering and disseminating statistical data on the incidence of VAC in certain specific areas.

Policy relevant findings and conclusions

Working on development according to a rights-based approach usually opens up a complex and lengthy process, the progress of which is very much determined by the particular context in which it takes shape. This particular case example clearly underlines the added value of working on the basis of an explicitly articulated theory of change that directs concrete action taken on the ground. The combination of inward and outward-looking theories of change, and concrete policies and instruments of change are crucial success factors therein.

However, the case example also shows that both the articulation and the application of theories of change demand a lot from organisations, in terms of: substantive focus; information and knowledge; situation and capacity analysis; staff skills; the ability to make the required long-term commitments to working for change; and sustained and contextual implementation capacity. Nevertheless, in the end, once these assets are indeed mobilised for the sake of realising one's articulated outward and inward looking theories of change, the chances of success are good. All in all this justifies paying more attention to theories of change in both development and human rights work, by both state and non-state actors, in the future.

At the same time, straightforward but impactful implications emerge both for organisations who themselves work for change along RBA lines and for their funders, which on both accounts include the UN and the EU. Almost all project/programme experiences that were reviewed in this case study point out that the classical three year project cycle format is not necessarily amenable to RBA goals and processes. Given the complexity of the goals pursued by RBA interventions and their focus on structural solutions, a project cycle of minimally five years was pleaded for by many involved in Plan Philippines VAC practice.

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Likewise, the focus on eliminating structural causes raises complicated questions about when and how to end interventions. For example, poverty eradication might be required. However, this goal might be too large to handle for a child-focused development organisation such as Plan. In preparation of a responsible rights-based end of an intervention, a conscious, clearly argued and communicated exit strategy then is very important as well. Finally, prevention of rights violations or deficits in the first place should be key.

Lobby and advocacy will often be crucial elements of rights-based interventions, e.g. to achieve law reform (at all levels including the local) and adoption of policy instruments. Awareness raising, skill training and other support activities are important as well. In the particular case example presented here it is e.g. key to break the silence around VAC.

While networking and collaboration with others will often be an absolute prerequisite for efficient and effective RBA work, close collaboration with others will often make it more difficult to determine the exact impact of a single actor's efforts. This is an aspect that should be accounted for in RBA project evaluations. In addition, the documentation, focus and level of specificity of evaluations often falls short of what would be required for a proper evaluation of RBA interventions, in light of its emphasis on finding structural solutions to rights deficits for all. Understandably, evaluations often focus on the details of a particular project or programme soon after it ended or when a decision on extension has to be made. The process nature of RBA would be much better served if such evaluations were more often combined with efforts to look back over a longer period of time. Particular good (and as a second priority maybe also bad) practice examples could also be recorded much more explicitly, and then become rich material for sharing and individual, collective and institutional learning.

Specific follow-up recommendations for UN and EU

Working on development according to a rights-based approach usually opens up a complex and lengthy process, the progress of which is very much determined by the particular context in which it takes shape. In response to the above-listed findings, RBA (or for that matter other) development interventions conducted, funded or otherwise supported by the UN and the EU would do well to incorporate the following aspects:

- an explicitly articulated theory of change that directs concrete action taken on the ground;
- combine inward-looking and outward-looking theories of change;
- appreciate the complexity and the lengthiness of RBA processes, and the demands they put on the organisations that design and implement RBA interventions as compared to 'ordinary' development interventions;
- where appropriate, allow for longer project cycles than currently is the standard, so as to allow time for the RBA process to unfold completely and for sustainability to be pursued and guaranteed;
- when RBA interventions have to be terminated, go by a conscious, clearly argued and communicated exit strategy;
- prevention of rights violations or deficits in the first place should be key, and is to be promoted through lobby and advocacy; awareness raising; skill training and other activities;
- RBA often requires deep collaboration between various actors, which makes it more difficult to distinguish the effects and/or impact of the work done by single actors. This has implications for evaluations of RBA interventions;
- Evaluation records and the documentation and sharing of good RBA practice examples have to be stepped up.

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