

**Research to Practice Paper:**

**Building Civic Participation and Increasing Social  
Connectedness through Human-Rights-Based Approaches**

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INTD 497

Lessons of Community and Compassion:  
Overcoming Social Isolation and Building Social Connectedness Through Policy  
and Program Development

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## Introduction

Since 2012, the United Nations and different members of global civil society have co-led *The World We Want*, an initiative to foster citizen participation in the definition of the global development agenda looking towards 2030. In the context of the creation and implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, 9,733,055 individuals from around the world have so far shared their personal priorities regarding the future of our world. “An honest and responsive government” is consistently ranked fourth out of 19 priorities across all countries, genders, ages, education levels, and HDI brackets<sup>1</sup>. Fair and accountable governance are critical for the post-2015 agenda to positively impact the lives of the most marginalized. Therefore, “the people closest to the problems” must be put at the forefront of agenda-setting. It is their rights which are being violated and it is to them that governments and global development initiatives must be accountable towards.

This paper builds off 2 assumptions: (1) civic participation and empowerment are pre-conditions for the continuance of all human rights, as they enable individuals to “claim their rights” and to hold their governments and

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<sup>1</sup> MyWorld 2015; Overseas Development Institute, Ipsos Mori, and United Nations. "*Have Your Say: Overview*." *MYWorld2015 Analytics*. MY World, May 2013. Web. 03 Dec. 2016.

institutions accountable<sup>2</sup>; and (2) social connectedness is a means of increasing the quality and quantity of civic participation<sup>3</sup>. This report will argue that civil participation programs must draw on rights-based approaches in order to build channels which efficiently support citizens in holding their governments and civil institutions accountable. The value of a rights-based approach to citizen participation will be illustrated in two contexts. The first case will advocate for child rights-based approaches in the prevention and monitoring of domestic sexual violence against female teenagers in the Madre de Dios region in Peru. The second will analyze the *Concerned Citizens of Abra for Good Governance*, a social accountability initiative for transparent public infrastructure spending in the province of Abra in the Philippines.

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<sup>2</sup> USIP. "*Civic Participation and Empowerment.*" *United States Institute of Peace*. United States Institute of Peace, n.d. Web. 03 Dec. 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Samuel, Kim, John Hammock, China Mills, and Diego Zavaleta. "*Social Isolation and Its Relationship to Multidimensional Poverty.*" Pg. 19. *Research to Practice Policy Briefs* 4 (2016): n. pag. Institute for the Study of International Development, Feb. 2016.

## **Civic participation, Accountability, and Governance**

- “2. *Everyone has the right to equal access to public service in his country.*  
3. *The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government [...]”*  
-Articles 21. 2 and 21.3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights<sup>4</sup>

Civic participation takes place when citizens are empowered to engage in official and unofficial political processes which influence their citizenship and human rights<sup>5</sup>. If civil society is entitled to participation, then all citizens are in theory, “empowered, protected, and accountable”<sup>6</sup>. For this to hold true, legitimate social connectedness between individuals and their civil society representatives is a required pre-condition. When misrepresentation takes place – even if well-intentioned, then the will of civil society is not respected, and its right to egalitarian public service is being violated. However, as argued by Gaventa, the systems through which people perceive themselves as citizens significantly impact their way and their will to claim their rights<sup>7</sup>. This self-perception is shaped by prevailing sociopolitical power structures, which determine if and how some internal capabilities are created. Internal capabilities are the internalized

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<sup>4</sup> OHCHR. "Universal Declaration of Human Rights." (n.d.): n. pag. *OHCHR*. United Nations Human Rights Officer of the High Commissioner. Web.

<sup>5</sup> USIP. "*Civic Participation and Empowerment*." *United States Institute of Peace*. United States Institute of Peace, n.d. Web. 03 Dec. 2016.

<sup>6</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>7</sup> Gaventa, John. "Introduction: Exploring Citizenship, Participation and Accountability." Pg. 8 *Institute of Development Studies Bulletin* (2002): n. pag. *Institute of Development Studies*. 2002. Web. 3 Dec. 2016

intellectual, emotional, and physical capacities of a person. On the other hand, central capabilities refer to the freedoms “created by a combination of personal abilities and the political, social, and economic environment”<sup>8</sup>. These are the basis of the Capabilities Approach proposed by Martha C. Nussbaum. Using this framework, it can be concluded that dominant structures directly impact the creation of central capabilities related to empowerment in civic participation. Two central capabilities which are particularly affected are that of control over one’s political environment, as well as the opportunity “to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one’s life”<sup>9</sup>.

Contemporary citizenship theory has shifted towards more proactive perceptions of civic participation. These notions align with rights-based approaches as they endow citizens with the agency to be “‘makers and shapers’ rather than ‘users and choosers’ of interventions or services designed by others”<sup>10</sup>. Therefore, within a nation or a community, citizenship is a fluid state of action. It is dependent on structural pathways that foster capacity building, which in turn allows and stimulates rights claiming. Nussbaum argues that “fundamental rights are only words unless and until they are made real by government action”<sup>11</sup>. This

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<sup>8</sup> Nussbaum, Martha C. *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*. Pg. 20  
Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap of Harvard UP, 2011. Print

<sup>9</sup> Ibid Pg. 35

<sup>10</sup> Cornwall and Gaventa 2000. In Gaventa 2002. Page 7

<sup>11</sup> Nussbaum 2011. Pg. 65

could be rephrased to state the following: fundamental rights are only words unless they are made real by *inclusive, legitimate, and appropriately represented citizen governance, that is supported by* decision-making from the ruling authority or government. Accordingly, governments and institutions at all levels must be held accountable. This is advocated for in targets 16.6, 16.7, 16.8, 16.a, and 16.b of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions\*. Engaged citizens are crucial for governmental accountability. If they are deprived of their sense of social and civic belonging, then their capability for participation decreases, and their exclusion from governance becomes normalized<sup>12</sup>. Civic participation requires that the government “support people’s capabilities, not just fail to set up obstacles”<sup>13</sup>.

*\*Please refer to Appendix I for a detailed breakdown of each target.*

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<sup>12</sup> Samuel et all. 2016. Pg. 4-5.

<sup>13</sup> Nussbaum 2011. Pg. 65

## The Human Rights Based Approach

*“Development is indeed a momentous engagement with freedom’s possibilities”<sup>14</sup> – Amartya Sen*

There is a close link between the Capabilities Approach supported by Sen and Nussbaum, and the Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA)<sup>15</sup>. The HRBA is a development paradigm which embeds “the international human rights system and its inherent notion of power and struggle” into development planning<sup>16</sup>. A crucial aspect of HRBA is that it seeks to “strengthen accountability of duty bearers for human rights”, while empowering right-holders in a context of equity and non-discrimination<sup>17</sup>. This suggests that human rights are inherently political, as they are inevitably attached to sociopolitical obligations. Human rights are inseparable from “the question of who has obligations in relation to these rights”<sup>18</sup>. The claiming of this accountability is inalienable from the role of civil society. As previously established, the value of civil society’s participation is heavily determined by the strength of the social connectedness of its citizens. Thus, social

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<sup>14</sup> Sen, Amartya. *“Development as Freedom”*. Pg. 268. 1999. New York: Alfred Knopf.

<sup>15</sup> Nussbaum 2011. Pg. 62

<sup>16</sup> Kirkemann Boesen, Jakob, and Tomas Martin. *“Applying a Rights-Based Approach: An Inspirational Guide for Civil Society.”* (2007): Pg. 9. *Child Rights International Network*. The Danish Institute for Human Rights. 2007. Web.

<sup>17</sup> Theis, Joachim. *Rights-based Monitoring and Evaluation: A Discussion Paper*. Pg. 9. *Child Rights International Network*. Save the Children, Apr. 2003. Web.

<sup>18</sup> Kirkemann Boesen and Tomas 2007. Pg. 10

connectedness, civic participation, and human rights accountability, are inextricably linked.

The process of HRBA is as follows: (1) HRBA initiatives help enforce accountability of duty-bearers and assist right-holders in demanding their rights; (2) right-holders claim their rights from duty-bearers; (3) duty-bearers fulfil their responsibilities towards right-holders through changes in policies, programs, and participation; and (4) people's lives are improved<sup>19</sup>. The adjustments can be measured through indicators that specify the "levels of commitment towards and compliance with human rights by duty-bearers"<sup>20</sup>. HRBA initiatives that impact people's lives happen across a four-level spectrum of change, ranging from the individual, to the structural, programmatic, and societal levels<sup>21</sup>.

A framework to assess this spectrum is offered by consultants from the Health and Human Rights Journal. Their research indicates that at the first level of the spectrum, the individual level, changes happen in the attitudes, knowledge and behaviors of an individual or a community of individuals. Second, at the structural level, changes impact regulatory measures, cross-sectoral engagement, and

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<sup>19</sup> Theis 2003. Pg 2.

<sup>20</sup> Theis 2003. Pg. 8

<sup>21</sup> Thomas, Rebekah, Shyama Kuruvilla, Rachael Hinton, Steven L.B. Jensen, Veronica Magar, and Flavia Bustreo. "Assessing the Impact of a Human Rights-Based Approach across a Spectrum of Change for Women's, Children's, and Adolescents' Health." *Health and Human Rights Journal* 17.2 (2015): n. pag. Web

accountability and participation mechanisms in civil and governmental institutions. Third, at the programmatic level, the HRBA impacts the delivery of programs and the staff capacity in the planning and execution of HRB methods. Finally, at the societal level, changes are seen in the notions of participation, culture, and social equity, in social systems, dynamics and norms<sup>22</sup>. Properly designed HRBA programs are entrenched in human rights principles regardless of which level they are addressing. These programs must acknowledge “synergies within sectors and pay attention to linkages between micro and macro levels”<sup>23</sup>. For these linkages to be appropriately identified, HRB initiatives necessitate disaggregated data at the micro level, which can “serve as a reality check [...] and hold duty-bearers into account”<sup>24</sup>. Furthermore, they require embedded monitoring and regulation mechanisms which must be widely accessible and relevant in the right-holders’ view<sup>25</sup>.

The programming for different levels of impact will highly vary depending on the concern and the right-holders involved. However, it is possible to “operationalize human rights principles [...] by turning them into practical

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<sup>22</sup> “Human rights impact framework across a spectrum of change, with illustrative examples of impacts and methods” in Thomas et al. 2015

<sup>23</sup> Theis, Joachim. *Promoting Rights-based Approaches: Experiences and Ideas from Asia and the Pacific*. Pg. 98. Bangkok: Save the Children Sweden, 2004. *Child Rights International Network*. Save the Children Sweden, 2004. Web.

<sup>24</sup> Theis 2004. Pg.99

<sup>25</sup> Thomas et al. 2015. Ibid. Pg. 8

standards for programming for specific issues”<sup>26</sup>. This will be examined in the following sections through case-based applications.

### **Preventing sexual violence in Madre de Dios through HRBA and Social Connectedness**

*“Children who organize themselves are better able to protect themselves”*<sup>27</sup>  
-Save the Children

In 2013, Peru ranked first in a Latin American study for prevalence of sexual assault<sup>28</sup>. Madre de Dios, a region which extends across the southern Peruvian Amazon, has the highest proportion of reports for sexual assault of underage citizens. 85.8 out of each 100,000 underage people reported being sexually assaulted in 2013, a majority of these being girls of 7 to 17 years of age<sup>29</sup>. Vulnerability to sexual violence is often construed to be reflective of inequality and other barriers to development. Surprisingly, Madre de Dios has constantly increased its HDI over the past decade. However, disaggregated data shows that the only indicator that has improved is GDP per capita, while life expectancy and education have decreased<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> Theis 2004. Pg.19

<sup>27</sup> Theis 2004. Ibid

<sup>28</sup> DEMUS 2013. The Center of Study for the Defense of Women. <http://www.demus.org.pe/>

<sup>29</sup> Zevallos, Nicolás; Mujica, Jaris; Vizcarra, Sofía ”*Controles domésticos para la prevención de violaciones a mujeres adolescentes*”. Pg. 30. Promsex 2016

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. Pg. 36

A 2013 study concluded that there have been changes to local lifestyles and family dynamics which are correlated to sexual assault of minors in Madre de Dios<sup>31</sup>. An example is the increased outsourcing of the care of minors to people outside of the family nuclei. These changes were revealed through interviews with local teenagers and social workers. Initiatives to address this have been introduced at the local level (through workshops in schools), and at the departmental level (through collaboration between local authorities, police, and social services)<sup>32</sup>. However, children are seldom put at the center of existing initiatives, and these have had limited results. Perhaps this is because traditionally, children-adult relationships are still dominated by traditional attitudes<sup>33</sup>. Even in seemingly participatory approaches to child rights, children often play a tokenistic role, lacking “favorable conditions for children’s involvement”, and therefore impeding capacity-building<sup>34</sup>.

Yet, there are multiple benefits to the promotion of children’s sociopolitical empowerment. Encouraging their participation can improve and increase their

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid. Pg. 43

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. Pg. 49

<sup>33</sup> VanBeers in Theis 2003. *Promoting Rights-based Approaches: Experiences and Ideas from Asia and the Pacific*. Pg. 52. Bangkok: Save the Children Sweden, 2004. *Child Rights International Network*. Save the Children Sweden, 2004. Web.

<sup>34</sup> Theis 2004. Ibid. Pg 56

confidence, resilience, and sense of social connectedness<sup>35</sup>. As right-holders, children who practice citizenship are more likely to claim their rights. If initiatives at the micro and macro level do not respect childrens' right to information, expression, and decision-making, then duty-bearers fail to support right-holders. These rights must be mirrored at every level of the change spectrum. An HRBA model for children's participation developed by Save the Children indicates that interventions can range from simple additions such as providing child-friendly information about the child right's initiatives, to more complex undertakings, such as involving children in staff recruitment for programs<sup>36</sup>.

In the case of girls in Madre de Dios, there is vast room for the implementation of HRBA programs that reach the most vulnerable children, and respect and recognize them as right-holders. Policy and programs must develop cross-sector networks that mobilize against sexual assault of girls. They must also ensure changes in behaviors and perceptions of child participation at the individual level, in vulnerable girls and in adults. This will improve the quality of social relations of these children with their surrounding communities, therefore increasing their agency. This change is absolutely necessary in order for changes at the structural, programmatic, and societal level, to be truly rights-oriented.

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<sup>35</sup> Synergos 2014. Pg. 3. "*Building Social Connectedness: A brief guide for practitioners working with children and youth*". Social Connectedness Programme. Johannesburg: Synergos South Africa

<sup>36</sup> Theis 2004. Pg. 47.

## **Concerned Citizens of Abra: Demanding Good Governance through Social Accountability**

*“Corruption will continue [...] until those with a stake in ending it are able to oppose it in ways that cannot be ignored”<sup>37</sup>*

In 1986, the Concerned Citizens of Abra for Good Governance (CCAGG) was founded with the goal of observing governmental projects in the Abra region, in the northern Philippines. CCAGG developed a volunteer-based monitoring system for infrastructure projects<sup>38</sup>. The organization was able to call out incomplete projects which had misallocated resources. Although the group was met with resistance from government officials and constructors, the authorities liable for 20 projects were reprimanded and the CCAGG was considered a success<sup>39</sup>. Citizens of Abra engaged in several processes to hold their state accountable for unmet rights, therefore engaging in social accountability<sup>40</sup>.

Although this is an exemplary case of civic participation, 75% of Abra’s roads remain unpaved today<sup>41</sup>. Citizens lack effective “structures for intervention within the government” and therefore their rights still go unmet<sup>42</sup>. There exists an

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<sup>37</sup> Johnston 2014. Pg 1 in Camargo, Claudia Baez, and Franziska Stahl. *"Social Accountability: A Practitioner's Handbook."* Basel Institute on Governance. USAID; Transparency International; Engaged Citizenry, Responsible Governance, 2016. Web.

<sup>38</sup> Civicus. "Concerned Citizens of Abra for Good Governance: Case Study." Pg. 2. *DataShift*.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid Pg. 4.

<sup>40</sup> Camargo and Stahl 2016

<sup>41</sup> Civicus. Pg. 7.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

established model for accountability, but its instrumental value is low, and therefore reduces the quality of the right-holders' social connectivity, increasing their vulnerability<sup>43</sup>.

The current state of CCAGG is misaligned with a HRBA because it is caught in a cycle of unresponsive institutions. The existence of the platform changed attitudes of citizenship at the individual level, and changed volunteer capacity at the programmatic level. However, structural and societal changes are needed in order to shift power dynamics and foster successful citizen empowerment. Without these, the citizens of Abra remain isolated, in a system that obviates their needs. This illustrates the many layers of social connectedness, and shows that it not only because citizens are structurally integrated on paper, that they are exempt from isolation in practice.

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<sup>43</sup> Samuel et all. 2016. Pg. 5

## **Conclusion**

As illustrated in both cases, building effective accountability paths across institutions is extremely complex. This essay advocates for the use of a Human Rights-Based Approach in building participatory channels, because rights-based efforts recognize the multiplicity of layers encompassed within meaningful civic participation. The HRBA provides a good basis for social accountability, however, it is not to be considered a static formula, but rather a constantly evolving process, which requires careful modification depending on the context it is applied in. By changing the attitudes and behaviors of both duty-bearers and right-holders, the HRBA increases the social connectedness of right holders, reduces their social isolation, and empowers them to claim their rights through instrumental participation.

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## **Appendix 1: Sustainable Development Goal 16: Description and Targets**

SDG 16: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.

### **Targets:**

#### **16.1**

Significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere

#### **16.2**

End abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children

#### **16.3**

Promote the rule of law at the national and international levels and ensure equal access to justice for all

#### **16.4**

By 2030, significantly reduce illicit financial and arms flows, strengthen the recovery and return of stolen assets and combat all forms of organized crime

#### **16.5**

Substantially reduce corruption and bribery in all their forms

#### **16.6**

Develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels

#### **16.7**

Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels

#### **16.8**

Broaden and strengthen the participation of developing countries in the institutions of global governance

#### **16.9**

By 2030, provide legal identity for all, including birth registration

#### **16.10**

Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements

#### **16.a**

Strengthen relevant national institutions, including through international cooperation, for building capacity at all levels, in particular in developing countries, to prevent violence and combat terrorism and crime

#### **16.b**

Promote and enforce non-discriminatory laws and policies for sustainable development

Taken from: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg16>