

Project Briefing

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Key points

- Human rights and pro-poor growth are complementary and compatible, and both are central to development and poverty reduction
- The strongest linkage between the two is that they are both concerned with promoting equality, equity and non-discrimination
- It is vital to identify practical entry points for integrating human rights and pro-poor growth

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Human rights and pro-poor growth

Marta Foresti, Kate Higgins and Bhavna Sharma

Since the mid-1990s, the understanding of the relationship between human rights and development has been growing. There is increasing recognition of the relationship between the failure to realise human rights and the continuation of poverty, exclusion, vulnerability and conflict. There is also increasing acknowledgement of the vital role human rights play in mobilising social change; transforming state-society relations; removing the barriers faced by the poor in accessing services; and providing the basis for the integrity of the information services and justice systems needed for the emergence of dynamic, market-based economies. The relationship between human rights and growth is key to advance these objectives.

This Project Briefing provides an overview of an ODI study that analyses the relationship between human rights and pro-poor growth and identifies synergies, complementarities and points of connection, as well as latent tensions or contradictions. Crucially, it also provides some practical recommendations and entry points for taking forward a more integrated approach to human rights and pro-poor growth. The study was commissioned by the Governance Network (GOVNET), under the OECD Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC) with the aim of building the foundations for effective collaboration between different constituencies for sustainable development.

Pro -poor growth: priorities, challenges and opportunities

The literature points to some critical assumptions and tenets underlying the pro-poor growth approach, including: growth is a means and not an end to development; economic growth is good for poverty reduction (e.g. Dollar and Kray, 2000); inequality limits the extent to which growth contributes to poverty

reduction; and policies can enhance the poverty reduction benefits of growth (e.g. Wiggins with Higgins, 2008).

The OECD policy guidance, Promoting Pro Poor Growth: Policy Guidance for Donors (OECD, 2007a), welcomed and endorsed by DAC Ministers and Heads of Development Agencies in 2006, describes pro-poor growth as a 'pace and pattern of growth that enhances the ability of poor women and men to participate in, contribute to and benefit from growth'. It also identifies key priorities of pro-poor growth, which include the engagement and participation of the poor; distributional objectives; addressing discrimination; and the accountability and transparency of the state.

Although pro-poor growth is an increasingly accepted approach in most agencies, divergence remains on a number of issues. These range from the level of emphasis of different dimensions and priorities, and the relationship between pro-poor growth and other frameworks for poverty reduction, to whether growth is a means or an end of development and ways it can be operationalised. The main challenges in taking pro-poor growth forward will mean turning the conceptual framework into effective operational approaches.

As in many areas related to development cooperation, experts' views on pro-poor growth vary widely. Some consider pro-poor growth to be concerned primarily with income redistribution whilst others approach it from a holistic perspective, including sustainability, social inclusion and expansion of opportunities. Some describe pro-poor growth in terms of outcomes, i.e. any growth strategy that results in poverty reduction, whilst others think that 'additional' policies and strategies are needed to ensure social as well as economic outcomes. Participation is a key dimension. In some cases this means participation by marginalised groups in economic policy-making,

in others the focus is on participation in the labour market and in productivity. More generally, pro-poor growth is seen increasingly as a political agenda, which is not always easy or possible to reconcile with more technocratic approaches. Against this background, the consensus achieved within the DAC on the pro-poor growth concept is an important and notable achievement, providing a common basis for implementing pro-poor growth approaches.

Nevertheless, both opportunities and challenges arise in taking the pro-poor growth agenda forward. Opportunities include ensuring more political dialogue and engagement in pro-poor growth with a greater focus on governance and capacity of state institutions. More attention is needed for issues of empowerment, engagement and voice of the poor and excluded – all critical for the achievement of pro-poor growth outcomes. The global financial crisis could be an opportunity to re-think the role of the state in growth strategies. At the same time, there is a risk that the crisis will revive an approach of ‘growth at any cost’, without a sufficient pro-poor focus.

The lingering academic controversy on the pro-poor growth definition could represent a challenge to efforts to move this agenda forward. Critically, practitioners point to the challenge of translating pro-poor growth principles and priorities into operational policies and programmes. Pro-poor growth is about challenging elements of traditional economic thinking, for example, by proposing that growth is not the end but a means to development. This requires a shift in theories, organisational policies and programme design.

Pro-poor growth and human rights: compatible frameworks

Pro-poor growth and human rights are considered both central and complementary approaches for development and poverty reduction efforts. This emerges from the analysis of the literature carried out as part of this study (e.g. Seymour and Pincus, 2008; OECD, 2007b), and is widely confirmed by the feedback gathered from interviews with experts who do not, on the whole, see any major obstacles in integrating pro-poor growth and human rights, particularly at the theoretical level.

The linkages between the two vary in nature, strength and potential for implementation. The strongest linkage is that they are both concerned with promoting equality, equity and non-discrimination. However, if equity is to be achieved in terms of income redistribution only, it would fall short of addressing other dimensions of discrimination that undermine the realisation of human rights. Issues related to power, voice and active participation are also identified as common to the two approaches, although the link is not as explicit. This is partly because these issues are not always considered central to pro-poor growth.

In some cases, pro-poor growth can support the realisation of human rights. It is also true that human rights principles and standards could strengthen pro-poor growth policies by, for example, emphasising the accountability and transparency of institutions responsible for economic policy making or by facilitating access to justice by the poor. However, some scepticism remains as to how practical or effective human rights would be as an entry point to engage in a policy dialogue at the national level or to discuss the affordability and costs of different policy and budgetary options for achieving poverty reduction.

While, in general, most economists would agree that civil and political (CP) rights have a key role to play in ensuring sustainable economic growth, the role of economic, social and cultural (ESC) rights is less clear. Some of the concerns include weak justiciability – that is the issues over which a court can exercise its authority in many countries, cost implications for the full realisation of these rights and a preoccupation with the limited fiscal space in many developing countries. In a few cases, the very notion of ESC rights as absolute entitlements was considered problematic by the experts consulted for this study. Overall, there is limited understanding and knowledge of the ESC rights framework, instruments and principles (such as progressive realisation, maximum use of available resources, etc.).

There are five main challenges that need to be overcome in order to make progress on a more integrated approach to human and pro-poor growth. First, there are the controversies around pro-poor growth definitions and the ways in which such growth should be implemented. Second, there is the difficulty in engaging with human rights language and the resulting misconceptions on what human rights really are and how they work in practice at international and national level. Third, there is the universal and indivisible nature of human rights, which tend to be interpreted as obstacles to prioritisation between different options for reducing poverty. The fourth challenge concerns the normative and legalistic dimensions of human rights, which can lead to unrealistic expectations, particularly in resource constrained environments. Finally, there is the lack of solid evidence of rights-based approaches that have made a significant difference on the ground.

Pro-poor growth and human rights: the institutional dimension

Despite a general agreement on the compatibility between the two frameworks, in practice, cross fertilisation between human rights and pro-poor growth remains very limited, and the two agendas tend to move along parallel lines in most development agencies. In addition to the challenges outlined above, the opportunities for dialogue and

engagement between practitioners of different disciplines within or outside their agencies are very limited. This is perceived as one of the main constraints for a more integrated approach to pro-poor growth and human rights.

Within development agencies, pro-poor growth and human rights face similar challenges. They can both be considered 'ideological' and not easy to translate into operational priorities. They both require some degree of professional cross fertilisation, which is often difficult to achieve in organisations structured around separate sectoral and professional teams.

Both agendas face political economy challenges that constrain their outcomes and that are not easy to overcome. However, in general, pro-poor growth is considered an easier, more accepted and practical entry point in most agencies, whilst a human rights framework remains a more challenging one to take on board.

A number of factors may explain the differences between agencies. The policy space for human rights and pro-poor growth linkages is largely determined by the institutional culture of an organisation, including existing incentives or blockages for multi-disciplinary work, the size of the agency and the related ways of working, both at headquarters and on the ground.

In some agencies the political dimension of pro-poor growth, and even more of human rights, is a particular challenge. This is the case at the World Bank where controversies still exist as to whether the Bank should engage at all with political matters, particularly at country level.

It appears that the size of individual agencies could be a significant determinant of the way in which they deal with the linkages between these agendas.

In relatively small agencies, such as the Danish Development Agency (Danida) or Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC), the boundaries between different disciplines and professional expertise tend to be less strong. In the course of their careers, staff working in smaller aid agencies are likely to engage in different programmatic areas and to be directly involved in multidisciplinary work. This seems to have some effect in terms of a more favourable or open approach towards integrated agendas, including those on human rights and pro-poor growth. In agencies structured around professional teams, such as the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID), it was reported that the opportunities and, crucially, the incentives to engage in multidisciplinary initiatives are limited, and this is reflected in their approach to policy development. As a result, opportunities for the human rights team to engage with economists are limited, and this makes it very difficult to take forward a more integrated approach.

Operational entry points: the way forward

The current environment, including the global economic crisis, could be conducive for taking forward more integrated approaches to pro-poor growth and human rights. Current debates focus on the central role of the state in development processes, re-thinking economic policies, the centrality of fiscal policies and a new agenda on international governance. All of these have the potential to be good entry points for multidisciplinary dialogue and engagement.

In taking forward a more integrated agenda, the challenges outlined above will need to be taken into account. In particular, it is important to recognise that the language of human rights does not easily or always lend itself to identifying operational priorities, though in principle it is useful for establishing policy dialogue at the national level. The human rights community has a challenging task ahead in addressing these difficulties and identifying ways to engage with different audiences. The practical added value of human rights in development work remains an open question in the minds of many economists, and more persuasive efforts are needed to answer this question, with a particular focus on empirical evidence.

Several operational entry points for integrating human rights and pro-poor growth were identified by the experts consulted during the study. The six mentioned most frequently were: employment policies and labour rights; land and property rights; gender and women's contribution to labour markets; fiscal policies; social protection and food policies; and governance. These entry points are considered real opportunities to bring human rights and pro-poor growth closer together. Among practitioners working on poverty reduction, governance and human rights, there is a sense that if the debate shifts to the operational level, away from theoretical and policy debates, it has the potential to achieve real change.

As part of shifting the debate towards the operational dimension, great interest was expressed in experimenting with human rights as outcomes of development policies, including pro-poor growth policies, not just as principles underlying policy or programmes. This would imply a focus on attempting to assess development results in relation to better fulfilment of, and respect for, human rights.

Conclusions and recommendations

Overall, pro-poor growth and human rights are seen as complementary approaches, and the study found no real sense of obstacles against the integration of the two agendas, particularly at the theoretical level. At the policy level, however, many challenges remain, mostly related to organisational structures, culture and incentives.

The greatest opportunities for taking forward an integrated approach between human rights and

pro-poor growth is found at the operational level, where several entry points were identified.

There is a real need to move the debate towards the operational implications of human rights and pro-poor growth integration, and away from theoretical and policy debates. Demonstrating the added value of an integrated approach is going to be crucial, and more efforts are needed to build an evidence base for this, through research and evaluation.

Promoting dialogue and engagement between practitioners and academics from different disciplines, economics and human rights in particular, is a top priority. A failure to do so would result in reinforced prejudices and misconceptions about the two agendas, more rhetorical arguments and, more generally, lack of knowledge. This would undermine any efforts to take forward a more integrated agenda.

The determination to explore human rights and pro-poor growth linkages in more depth began in the DAC Governance Network (GOVNET) through its Human Rights Task Team, which commissioned the survey, which has also been reviewed by members of the DAC Network on Poverty Reduction (POVNET). Today, following up on findings and recommendations of this study, the OECD DAC is playing a key role in two main ways. First, OECD DAC is providing a space and a process for the interdisciplinary dialogue between economists, pro-poor growth practitioners and human rights experts in different agencies, through POVNET and GOVNET. Second, OECD DAC is supporting sectoral case studies for some of the operational entry points areas identified by the study, with a view to building a solid evidence base for taking forward a more integrated agenda on pro-poor growth and human rights.



Overseas Development
Institute

111 Westminster Bridge
Road, London SE1 7JD

Tel +44 (0)20 7922 0300

Fax +44 (0)20 7922 0399

Email
publications@odi.org.uk

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Project Information:

This briefing provides an overview of an ODI study that analyses the relationship between human rights and pro-poor growth and identifies synergies, complementarities and points of connection, as well as latent tensions or contradictions. The study was commissioned by OECD-DAC-GOVNET and comprised a literature review on the conceptual and operational interfaces between human rights and pro-poor growth; in-depth semi structured interviews with 30 economists and

experts from development agencies and academia; data analysis; and the drafting of a synthesis report.

The opinions expressed and arguments employed herein do not necessarily reflect the official views of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) or of the governments of its member countries.

For further information contact Marta Foresti, Programme Leader, Politics and Governance, ODI: (m.foresti@odi.org.uk) or Lisa Williams at OECD-DAC-GOVNET Secretariat: Lisa.Williams@oecd.org

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