Rights-based development from a faith-based perspective

Joint Position Paper

Rights and Development Group

*"My Rights are arising like the Sun;
will you deny this Sun to rise?"*

National Federation of Dalit Women

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Preface

This Paper has been elaborated by the Rights and Development Group, staff members of seven Aprodev member-organisations and Lutheran World Federation/Department of World Service as an Aprodev-observer[1], after examining present policies and practices of their organizations and with due reference to the Mandate given to the group to coordinate efforts related to rights and development.

The aim of this paper is to establish a common understanding within the group of the relationship between rights and development and to strengthen a joint agenda in this regard. The paper also offers a shared language for our organizations to facilitate coordination, particularly in work with mutual Southern partners.

The paper starts by outlining the need for intensifying efforts in the field of development and rights and establishes the foundation and motivation of our policies in this field in the shared faith-based identity of our organizations. The paper then proceeds to describe the added value of rights-based strategies in our development work and to outline the main elements of rights-based work. The paper concludes by presenting a joint minimum agenda for our agencies in order to operationalize these strategies.

The process leading to this final document has involved an extended search for common ground, involving not only our colleagues within in the different organisations but also the voices and opinions of our partner organisations who have contributed much of what we describe below. We have in the course of this process also concluded that among our partners there is great support for the joint agenda summarized in the last paragraph of this paper.

During consultations held on drafts of this paper, it also became evident that the paper could be addressed to at times very different constituencies: our own domestic constituencies, colleagues within our own organization, and our overseas partners and their constituencies. To address the different needs and to maintain an inclusive approach, we have also elaborated an addendum that sets out in greater detail and scope the theological grounding of the principles of rights-based approaches.

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1) Bread for the World, Christian Aid, Church of Sweden DanChurchAid, EED, ICCO, Norwegian Church Aid and Lutheran World Federation/Department of World Service (observer).

I. Persistent Poverty and Human Rights Violations: the Urgency of Action

Better policy answers to the current challenges

This position paper is founded on the concern within our organizations around the persistence of poverty and growing inequality in many countries around the world. Both these issues have been well-documented in successive UN Human Development Reports. Despite increasing global prosperity in the last decades, relative and absolute poverty in many countries in the South continues. More than a quarter of the world's population survives on the equivalent of less than one US dollar per day. Almost half struggles to survive on less than two. The first of the Millennium Development Goals - the reduction of poverty and of the number of hungry and malnourished- is where least progress has been achieved. The FAO notes that the number of hungry and malnourished has increased since 1996.

This persistence of poverty remains alarming, particularly given the wealth and possibilities at the disposal of mankind. Resources, knowledge and skills are available to develop and implement policies that could and should contribute to a sharp decline in poverty. It is this gap between what is possible and what is actually being done, together with the clear signs of a general lack of political will to address theses issues, that encourages us to explore how we and our partners can act and work together more effectively to contribute to better policy answers to the current challenges.

Enrichment and exclusion are not necessarily but are often two sides of the same coin. It is entirely feasible to redistribute welfare gains more equally within a society in such a way that even the poorest segments of a society can eventually escape poverty. However, too often policies stimulate the enrichment of small elites and lead to or cement the social exclusion of poor and marginalized groups. Growing wealth is frequently linked to the concentration of property, to exclusive access to productive resources, such as land and water, or to an overexploitation of labour or other forms of exploitative working conditions.

Forms of discrimination and lack of entitlement

Processes of social exclusion, of discrimination in access to productive resources, of exclusion from decision-making bodies, and of exploitation of vulnerable women and men are important reasons for the persistence of poverty. Inequalities are becoming institutionalised in many countries, reinforced by political, economic, social and cultural structures. Systemic discrimination on the basis of gender, class, caste, ethnicity and other identities persists, leading to the structural exclusion of large groups of men and women from developmental processes and benefits. In particular, gender discrimination remains widespread.

National policies often reflect the interests of sectors holding power and are too seldom oriented to the interests and needs of vulner-

able and marginalized men and women. Health, education, social services, taxation and subsidy systems, property rights and their legal protection etc. are often tilted in favour of local elites. Formal and informal political decision-making structures often work against poor and marginalised women and men, particularly in rural areas and in poor quarters of urban conglomerates where most of the poorer and politically excluded segments of societies are to be found. For poor women and men, access to health and education, to productive resources, to a functioning legal system, to land-registration systems, to justice and appeals mechanisms for checking discriminatory laws or their practices etc. are often limited. These constitute effective institutionalised barriers to remedy in any substantive way their situation.

National governance issues are not the only determinants of poverty and exclusion: international policies can also contribute to or exacerbate existing local forms of social exclusion and foster poverty. International trade policies can and often do have a direct impact on the income poor producers or consumers derive from their work. Policies of multilateral institutions can and sometimes do limit states' capacities to act in favour of poorer segments of their societies. Losses by developing countries through trade protection, immigration barriers and increasing debt burdens amount to many times the aid developing countries receive. Social exclusion is a pressing downside to many of the economic policies pursued by multilateral institutions. Processes of social disintegration, collective frustration expressed sometimes in religious intolerance, spontane-

ous migratory movements and security issues affect whole regions and put democratisation at risk.

Rights-Based Strategies: an important tool for strengthening empowerment and advocacy work

In order to overcome discrimination and the lack of entitlement facing poor women and men, a rights-based approach to development is an important tool for organisations to address some of the root-causes of poverty and exclusion. A rights-based approach strengthens and complements other strategies in North-South development cooperation, such as strengthening capacities of local partners and enhancing their capabilities to use productive resources or other income earning opportunities. It stimulates analysis and reflection on the causes of entitlement failure and allows for a more precise description of roles, obligations and responsibilities of the different actors in the development process. It is a way of reducing the accountability gap that in many countries works against the poor.

From a faith-based perspective, our long-standing commitment to development with justice would seem to strongly support such a rights-based approach. However, certain essential issues need a stronger and more structured commitment. In particular, we must provide space for internal analysis and self-empowering learning processes that are fundamental for local ownership and for the ability to devise and implement effective rights-based strategies at the local and national levels. Poverty and social exclusion have international, regional, national

and local dimensions. There is little hope for change unless we commit ourselves to consolidated collaborative action, linking these levels.

Rights-based strategies hold great potential as a powerful tool for empowerment aimed at political, social and economic transformation. However, unless we adapt our current policies and practices to its principles and challenge unequal power relationships that underlie poverty, we will fall short of addressing the issues of institutionalized poverty and social exclusion confronting our world.

II. Development with Justice

Faith-based Development Work and Human Rights

The Eighth Assembly of the WCC in 1998, in connection with the 50th anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights stated: "As Christians, we are called to share in God's mission of justice, peace and respect for all Creation and to seek for all humanity the abundant life which God intends. Within scripture, through tradition, and from the many ways in which the spirit illumines our hearts today, we discern God's gift of dignity for each person and their inherent right to acceptance and participation with the community. From this flows the responsibility of the churches, as the Body of Christ, to work for universal respect and implementation of human rights," (Consultation on "Human Rights and the Churches: New Challenges," Morges, Switzerland, June 1998).

As Christian, faith-based and church-related organisations, we must be clear to ourselves and our partners about the grounds on which we pursue development work and rights based-strategies in our work. Central is the manner in which the Bible bears witness from beginning to end of God's creating, redeeming and sustaining activities. God creates out of nothing, delivers from bondage, defends the vulnerable, strengthens the weak, and yearns for abundant life, peace and the integrity of creation.

Many 20th century developments in the area of human rights, including the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, have been strongly influenced if not inspired by Christians. Many

theologians have clarified the link between contemporary human rights commitments and various Christian traditions. However, as these traditions developed far earlier in history and under very different circumstances than Enlightenment-inspired human rights understandings caution is needed in moving too directly from biblical and early Christian perspectives to current human rights understandings. This is all the more important in today's multi-religious and secular world. Human rights have developed through complex, interacting historical processes, informed by experiences of oppression and totalitarianism, injustice and violations of human rights. However, human rights can be seen as both rooted in ancient religious beliefs and practices and as modern political fruits of those beliefs.

In the light of this orientation, development and human rights work are understood to be two important components of the justice work of the churches. Development implies a structural uplifting of people's well being: efforts to this end will only have positive results when the structural determinants of oppression and discrimination are overcome. In the New Testament, a clear distinction is made between 'charity' and 'diakonia' in which Jesus Christ is seen as the Diakonos and diakonia as the very being of the church. This implies that next to alleviating immediate needs, the church has to perceive injustice, taking up more fundamental issues such as power structures underlying poverty and oppression. Views on development with justice derived from the teaching of the church inspire us today in

efforts to address the downside of globalisation, marginalisation and the exclusion of an ever-increasing number of those living in daily hardship. It is, indeed, in biblical understanding of ways in which God's liberating action demands a continuous human response that we find inspiration for faith-based involvement in development.

Although human rights are consistent with biblical perspectives and priorities, Christians do not own them. Indeed, there has been an ambiguous historical record with regard to churches and human rights. This was expressed clearly at the Eighth Assembly of the WCC mentioned earlier: "As Christians, we believe that God created every person infinitely precious and endowed with equal dignity and rights. However, we confess that we have often failed to respect such equality, even in our own midst. We have not always stood up courageously for those whose rights and human dignity are threatened and violated by discrimination, intolerance, prejudices and hatred. Indeed Christians have sometimes been agents of such injustice. The World Council of Churches has affirmed that human rights, including the right to religious freedom, are not to be claimed by any religion, nation or group as an exclusive privilege, but rather that the enjoyment of these rights is essential in order to serve the whole of humanity."

Human dignity reflects our creation –female and male– in God's image. Accordingly, it is God-given and inherent in every human being – regardless of position in life, gender, race or any other human condition. Yet, while human dignity cannot be taken away, it is continuously exposed to violation. Through our work in partnership with southern organisations, we are witness to the way human dignity is violated from day to day – by extreme poverty, abuse of power, violence, unequal access to opportunities and resources, lack of security, and by systems and structures that have made people invisible and disposable. It is this imperative for defending men and women and their dignity against these violations that makes the international human rights endeavour essential, both for individuals, organisations and whole communities.

BEELD: Rebke Klokke

III. Value-Added of Rights-Based Strategies

We consider the following as defining the main value-added of including rights-based strategies in our work as faith-based agencies.

1. Human rights create entitlements for persons/citizens vis-à-vis their state. These entitlements can be legally claimed and can therefore strengthen our empowerment and advocacy work.

2. The obligations of states become clearer when checked in recourse procedures (court decisions, investigations etc.) A rights based framework allows us to better define government obligations and to develop criteria for designing and evaluating outcomes of policy processes. Human rights set standards for monitoring government performance, also in relation to economic, social and cultural rights. The policy development process should set priorities in such a way that particularly vulnerable groups are addressed first.

3. Human rights are individual entitlements. They set limits on the restrictions and deprivations that individuals can permissibly be allowed to bear even in the promotion of noble social goals or overall development objectives, such as economic growth.

4. A more traditional developmental way of thinking seldom asks how policy results were attained: in a rights-framework the quality of the process of policy development and implementation is of importance.

5. A rights based framework also provides us with additional tools for assessing the responsibilities and actions of non-state actors such as multinational corporations or other powerful private actors.

6. A rights-based assessment and framework provides us with a reference to identify and assess the obligations and responsibilities of third party states in terms of the human rights impact of their policy measures on persons living in another country: the extra-territorial obligations.

7. Development work undertaken by non-state actors can potentially lead us to assume roles which undermine the role of the state as primary duty bearer for basic economic and social rights. A rights-based approach can help organisations involved in the delivery of basic services such as food, water health and education, to have a clearer vision of the proper role and responsibility of governments to guarantee these services as basic human rights. As primary duty bearers, governments are responsible for the policies, budgets and regulations needed to ensure all citizens have equal opportunity to access affordable basic services. Churches and other non-state actors may continue to play a crucial role in the delivery of these services but these programmes must be harmonised with national sector strategies. In coordinating the different actors´ contributions to basic services-delivery, it must be recognised that both state and non-state actors have both rights and obligations.

IV. Rights-Based Approach: Making Rights a Reality for All

As outlined above, in the context of a political environment where poverty and inequality persist and states and other actors do not adequately respond to their obligations and responsibilities, we acknowledge the need to strengthen our current work with rights-based strategies. Internationally accepted human rights standards will constitute an important reference and guideline for our work, further guiding and informing our commitment as faith-based organisations in development and humanitarian work. The following outlines our joint understanding of the key elements in rights-based work.

A. The Principles

The starting point of all our development and humanitarian endeavours is the way we see those living in poverty and suffering the consequences of conflicts and disasters. They are rights-holders and not objects of charity. By accepting that individuals have legitimate claims to rights and a dignified life, we also acknowledge that there are actors in society who have obligations and responsibilities to realise human rights, the duty-bearers. The national state has the principal legal obligation, is the principal duty bearer, and should therefore always be addressed in rights-based strategies at the relevant strategic levels. However, other actors at different levels also have moral responsibilities to promote and respect rights and should also be addressed in our support.

Intrinsic to our commitment to rights-based strategies, we conceive the following as the main principles for focusing our actions and support:

A focus on structural and root causes:
At the root of poverty and rights violations lie complex social, cultural, political, and economic structures that exclude certain groups of women, men and children. Development efforts must not only meet their immediate needs but must also analyse and address the rules, institutions, power relations and mechanisms that exclude and discriminate against certain groups in society.

A focus on equality and non-discrimination,
The principles of equality and non-discrimination mandate particular attention to the groups most affected by rights violations and breaches, including indigenous people, women and minority groups. Development strategies must address the interests and needs of the most marginalised and vulnerable men and women in societies. In our support we need to strengthen their access to their rights, in particular their claims for an equal voice in the distribution of resources, to real access and control of these resources, and to non-discrimination within institutions, legislation, policy, and administrative practice.

A focus on empowerment
Impoverished and discriminated women and men and excluded communities remain at the centre of our work. In our rights-based support we continue to support and facilitate their empowerment endeavours, strengthening these

processes by increasing their capacity and opportunities for asserting rights, using law, and for addressing those with rights obligations and responsibilities.

A focus on participation
Process is as important as outcome. The political as well as the economic participation of impoverished and marginalised men and women is at the heart of rights-based strategies. No change in unequal, unjust power structures is possible without their active engagement and participation. It is local communities themselves who need to set the agenda, including influencing the choice of which rights should be prioritised when different rights come into conflict and priorities need to be set. Development work must therefore work to ensure the participation of impoverished and discriminated women and men themselves in the design, monitoring and evaluation of initiatives that impact their lives.

A focus on accountability
No use of political power is legitimate unless exercised in conformity with international human rights standards for protecting human dignity. Strengthening the accountability of duty-bearers to targeted rights-holders, through for example advocacy or capacity-building, becomes therefore a major focus in our endeavours. This principle of accountability also challenges our own organizations and partners to operate in ways that are transparent and accountable to the societies and communities in which we work. It urges us to support their access to complaint mechanisms and remedies in the event that their rights are

violated as part of either development or humanitarian assistance processes of which we are a part. All actors that contribute to violations or breaches of rights need to be held accountable.

A focus on community and the inter-relatedness of human beings
Rights based approaches do not only have the individual in focus but also recognise the human being as being part of a community. Public justice reflects all conditions of social life – economic, political, and cultural – which make it possible for persons to achieve dignity and humanity within the community in which they live. Community and public justice belong together. Dignity and rights are thus realised in community i.e. in relationship to others.

B. Strategic Orientation
We recognise the following strategic elements as orientation for our work in supporting rights-based strategies:

1. **Analysing the structural causes behind breaches and violations of rights**
   Rights-based strategies require solid analyses for identifying those excluded and discriminated against, the particular rights issues involved, the causes for this exclusion and discrimination, and the corresponding obligations and responsibilities of different actors in any given context. The specific obligations of the nation state at different levels, the responsibilities of third-party states (e.g. extraterritorial obligations), and the responsibilities of other actors need to be analysed and identified. In our work and support, international human rights stand-

ards will serve as important tools when ana-
lysing, together with our Southern partners,
the international, regional and national
contexts, as a basis for country policies and
programmes. It will further help guide the
design, monitoring and evaluation proc-
esses.

2. **Providing assistance and services to
   women, men, boys and girls suffering the
   consequences of rights deprivations and
   injustices**
   Direct assistance to impoverished and
   discriminated women, men, boys and girls
   will continue to be central in our work
   with rights-based strategies. However, in
   this work we should not undermine the
   long-term obligation of governments to
   respect, protect and fulfil its human rights
   obligations in this respect. We should
   be aware of the reasons for governments'
   non-compliance, whether it is a question
   of political will or capacity, and design and
   support strategies accordingly. The delivery
   of essential goods cannot and should not
   be taken over by civil society or other
   private actors. Guiding our work with serv-
   ice provision should therefore be a clear
   understanding of the relevant roles of each
   actor: a rights-based orientation allows us
   to define and understand these roles and
   responsibilities.

3. **Supporting Political and Legal Empower-
   ment Processes**
   Rights-based strategies provide both politi-
   cal and legal resources for strengthening
   empowerment processes. In addition to oth-
   er forms of empowerment (e.g. economic),
   rights-based strategies urge us to strengthen

political and legal empowerment processes,
notably in the form of socio-political and
legal activism.

- Socio-political activism
  In order to secure the realisation of
  rights, empowerment processes need to
  resource impoverished women and men
  with skills and awareness for holding
  actors to account. Strengthened organisa-
  tion and collective action need to be sup-
  ported for effecting the required changes
  in legislation, policy, institutions and
  practices. Increased awareness of one's
  rights is an important encouragement for
  action on social change. Civic as well as
  citizenship education programs are im-
  portant measures in this regard. Even in
  times of failing states or bad governance,
  human rights can function as an orienta-
  tion and encouragement for resistance
  and struggle.

- Legal activism
  Even in a well functioning legal order
  based on good governance and the rule
  of law human rights will not automati-
  cally be realised. Those who hold rights
  always need to take action to safeguard
  and ensure their access to these rights.
  Supporting legal literacy and other forms
  of legal action is therefore central in
  empowerment processes for supporting
  discriminated and impoverished women
  and men to seek and access remedies
  when their rights have been infringed.

4. **Addressing those with obligations and
   responsibilities**
   Rights-based strategies require that action
   is taken to also address and work with those
   with rights obligations and responsibilities.

Through advocacy or other actions, the national state, its relevant institutions, private companies, multi-lateral institutions etc. must be challenged and/or strengthened to live up to their obligations based on the priorities and demands of marginalised and impoverished women and men. However, other actors depending on the contextual analysis who have moral (if not legal) responsibilities should also be addressed in initiatives for securing the realisation of rights for these groups. This applies for example to traditional leaders, religious leaders etc.

5. **Addressing International Actors - linking the local to the international**
Rights-based strategies remain meaningless if the responsibilities for global injustices by international actors are ignored. This requires not only an analysis of the actions and responsibilities of the above-mentioned actors as part of the aforementioned analyses but also requires strategies and actions for addressing these actors. The newly developed concept of extraterritorial application of human rights is a promising pathway to apply human rights in a time of increasing globalisation of the obligations and responsibilities of different actors.

6. **Using Human Rights Standards and Mechanisms**
Empowerment and advocacy processes can be supported by linking these initiatives and processes to established international and regional human rights standards and mechanisms for both civil and political rights and economic, social and cultural rights. Using these mechanisms can provide support and legitimacy, particularly when national standards and mechanisms fail to provide the protection and/or do not comply with relevant treaty obligations.

7. **Building Alliances**
Combating poverty confronts us with recalcitrant power structures and their abuse. Changing these structures and institutions requires that we combine our efforts and competencies and we develop strong alliances that link local actors with regional and international actors.

8. **Rights-based Processes**
In rights-based work process is as important as outcome, measured through the effective participation and influence of rights holders in processes of design, monitoring and evaluation.

9. **Peace-building, reconciliation, and conflict sensitivity**
As there is limited rights enjoyment and rule of law without peace, the centrality of our work on peace and reconciliation is evident. However, increased claims for a more equitable share in national resources or within humanitarian aid programmes in conflict areas can heighten the potential for conflict. It is therefore important in our rights-based support that we and partners work to foresee and to understand the impact of programmes on existing and potential conflicts and incorporate "Do No Harm" principles in our support.

V. Our Joint Agenda

Based on this joint understanding of rights-based work, we commit ourselves to the following agenda. Within our own network diversity in our distinct development programmes is an asset. However, co-ordination is necessary in order to achieve complementarity: not all members need to do everything. The following agenda is not an encompassing list but a minimum programme to which we commit ourselves and is thus complementary to work we are doing in the areas of increasing peoples capacities.

1. We will endeavour to support and/or carry out participatory contextual rights-based analyses, with a precise identification of rights holders and relevant duty bearers, including the national state but also other actors with responsibilities e.g. international institutions, the corporate world, community and religious leaders etc. In our analyses we will pay special attention to the manner in which different identities affect access to rights and institutions and will ensure that our analyses particularly reflect on different gender needs and interests. We will regularly review and strengthen our partnerships on the basis of these analyses.

2. We acknowledge that community awareness and mobilisation, local capacity to reflect on rights constraints and their causes and to strategise and take action to redress them are critical for lasting change. This will be reflected in our capacity-building support and our commitment to groups who engage in mobilisation work. We will support the efforts of women and men living in poverty to engage in these processes and to undertake actions to advance their rights, including through the influencing of actors, institutions, policies, laws and public resource allocations.

3. We will support groups that work for the increased access of poor women and men to political and judicial-administrative processes and structures for asserting their rights. This can also include support at the local level for the strengthening of rights-sensitive informal and traditional mechanisms in order to ensure access to justice.

4. We recognise the fact that working with human rights creates risks. We therefore commit ourselves to do effective up-front risk analyses and to support partners that might be endangered in any way through rights-based work.

5. We will in particular address issues of gender discrimination, targeting resources to both self-empowering processes for women to overcome barriers to the realization of their rights, and to actions that secure the active engagement of men in work toward gender equality.

6. Efforts to address impunity, systemic discrimination (e.g. of indigenous communities) and systemic violence (e.g. against women and human rights defenders) will constitute shared priorities.

7. Given our faith-based identity, we shall support strengthened church capacity to mobilise around and act in defence of the rights of discriminated women and men.

8. Although in the context of natural disasters, conflict and failing and fragile states, urgency, space and/or the potential available for using rights-based strategies and holding duty-bearers to account can be restricted, we commit ourselves to exploring whatever rights-based strategies can be employed and to using available space for supporting communities affected by disaster and conflict to access assistance and adequate protection of their rights.

9. We shall actively support the use of international, regional and national human rights monitoring mechanisms such as the UN Treaty-Bodies, UN Special Rapporteurs, the Human Rights Council, individual complaint mechanisms, relevant regional human rights mechanisms etc.

10. A commitment to rights-based strategies has implications for the relationship between northern agencies and their partners. Working on these implications will be an essential element of our work together. The traditional donor-recipient model is not compatible with a joint commitment to human rights. There is thus a need for more emphasis on mutual accountability in our partnerships and the increased participation and influence of our partners on our agendae.

11. We commit to building strong, broad and creative alliances, recognising the role of church and faith-based platforms to promote human dignity from a rights-based commitment. Our human rights platform shall be both broad (encompassing many like-minded actors) and deep (covering a range from community-based organisations to international institutions). We shall work to effectively link these different actors in order to strengthen partners' advocacy actions and to engage different strategies, including the use of international mechanisms and fora.

Annex

The organizations from which we come are grounded in an ethos and in narratives, as well as with convictions and priorities of the Christian faith that are able to nurture, guide and sustain the work we do. On the surface, and for the purpose of practical collaboration with others, this faith basis may not appear to make the work we do in this area that distinctive. However, in focusing here on rights-based development work, this multifaceted faith grounding – along with that of other faith traditions — can enrich, deepen, critique, bring in new dimensions and tensions, and sustain this work over the long haul.

Many 20th century developments in the area of human rights, including the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, have been strongly influenced if not inspired by Christians. Many recent theologians have given much attention to the link between contemporary human rights commitments and various Christian traditions. Yet because these traditions developed far earlier in history, and under much different circumstances than did Enlightenment-inspired human rights understandings, there must be caution in too directly moving from biblical and earlier Christian perspectives to current human rights understandings, especially in today's multi-religious and secular world. Human rights have developed through complex, interacting historical processes, informed by experiences of oppression and totalitarian-

ism, injustice and violations of human rights. Yet human rights can be seen as rooted in and as modern political fruits of ancient religious beliefs and practices.

Although human rights generally are consistent with biblical perspectives and priorities, they are not "owned" by Christians. Indeed, there has been an ambiguous historical record with regard to churches and human rights, such as using select passages of Scripture to deny equal human rights to women or to justify the use of violence. In certain times and places, churches have been opposed to rather than promoters of basic human rights. Thus, sobering humility and ongoing critique are required: certain religious traditions and practices may need to be critiqued from human rights perspectives and certain (e.g. individualistic) human rights interpretations or applications may need to be critiqued from religious perspectives.

There must also be dialogical openness to what other religious traditions can bring to rights-based development work. Perspectives from other religious traditions become especially important, less there be a gap between (often secular) European and religious traditions prominent in other parts of the world.

Many traditions with origins in Asia, especially Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and a variety of traditional religions (e.g. in Africa) cannot imagine

or accept a system of rights that excludes religious dimensions because religion is part of the totality of life. Religious worldviews frequently offer a more profound language, based as they are on the transcendent. Religious traditions not only offer resistance to greed, the religion of secular modernism, but also inspiration and communal responsibility.[2]

It is crucial that there be ongoing inter-religious and intercultural dialogue about these matters, especially as they are enmeshed in what sometimes are conflicting cultural realities. Cultures can have both liberating and oppressive aspects. This is why human rights are such key reminders that it is not cultures in themselves but the human beings in them who are entitled to respect.

B. Shaped, Inspired and Guided by the Biblical Witness

At the same time, as Christian-based organizations, we must be clear about the grounds on which we pursue rights-based development work, and the added values or dimensions these faith commitments entail. This begins most fundamentally with the common Scripture we share. Scripture provides overarching narratives that help to (a) nurture a human rights ethos or "culture," (b) reiterate the priorities and expand the scope of this work, (c) remind us of critical balances or tensions, and (d) inspire and sustain us with a hope that goes beyond short-term successes or failures.

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2) Elisabeth Gerle, "Conflicting Religious-Cultural Discourses of Human Rights in the World Today" in Lutheran Ethics at the Intersections of God's One World, Karen L. Bloomquist, ed (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2005), p. 104.

What is central is how the Bible bears witness from beginning to end to God's creating, redeeming and sustaining activities. God creates out of nothing, delivers from bondage, defends the vulnerable, strengthens the weak, and yearns for abundant life, peace and justice for all of creation.

In creation **God imparts dignity to *all* human beings** (who are created in the image of God, Genesis 1:27), regardless of their faith or lack thereof. This is at the heart of what motivates human rights work. From a biblical perspective, human dignity is first and foremost in relation to God. This basic dignity must be vigorously defended and upheld in the face of all those forces that would compromise, violate or deny who human beings are. This dignity is multifaceted: it has to do with basic spiritual as well as physical and social needs. It includes the "bread" needed to sustain life on earth, the "bread" that is the right of everyone in community with others, and the "bread" of heaven. What it means to be human transcends narrow legalistic or reductionistic ways of viewing human beings and their rights, and can be enriched with perspectives from various religious traditions. Thus, political, civil, economic, social, cultural and religious rights must all be upheld.

Permeating biblical and theological traditions are understandings of human beings that involve dialectical relationships between the individual and the community, between freedom/liberty and obligations/responsibilities, between human dignity and human sinfulness, between human beings and the rest of creation. For example, individual rights should not be overemphasized at the expense of community, or social order and obligations

at the expense of individual freedom. These tensions need to be kept in balance in human rights work, depending on the specific context and circumstances at stake.

Justice and compassion are central to what God is about, and to what we are called to pursue. Justice is grounded in the righteousness of God, who delivers the oppressed from bondage (Exodus 20:2). Seeking justice implies looking out for the rights of all people, and compassion implies protecting and caring for those who lack rights. The two dimensions go together. The repeated call in Scripture to care for "strangers, widows and orphans" – to reach out in compassion that reflects God's love – necessarily involves laws that seek to ensure their just treatment. In Hebrew Scripture this is based not on the "rights" of individuals but on the obligations and duties of the community. Because order-restoring laws can themselves become oppressive, justice must continually be infused with the heart of compassion. Thus, the prophet cries out:

Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that the widow may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey! (Isaiah 10:1-2)

When some live in dire poverty or lack basic freedoms, this is an assault on the just order God intends. God is just and human beings are to be God's agents of justice in the world. Laws are for the sake of restoring a humane quality of life to all, so that they might enjoy freedom, equality and participation. From the perspective of theological anthropology, poverty is far more than a condition of entitlement failure. A just and compassionate social order, in which human flourishing can occur, is constructed from the bottom up. As Hannah proclaimed: "God raises up the poor from the dust...the needy from the ash heap... to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor" (I Samuel 2: 8a).

Freedom, dignity, equality and participation are key markers for human rights. Priority must be given to those most oppressed, excluded, discriminated against, or lacking in opportunities.
This was underlined in how Jesus proclaimed and embodied the new reign of God:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." (Luke 4:18-19)

God incarnate in Christ embodies self-giving, compassionate solidarity. Through the cross and resurrection, Christ decisively transforms the marginalization of those without rights, by fully identifying with them. Consequently, the Spirit of the Risen Christ is present throughout the created order, bringing possibilities for creative transformation wherever there is contempt for human life and denial of human rights.

In the end, therefore, what Christian faith can provide rights-based development work is an empowering sense of being able to imagine and live in the hope of a world different from the current realities of suffering, oppression and violence – i.e. "another world is possible!" – and to work tirelessly with others toward that goal.