

Make Rights Real

Introduction: promoting sexual and reproductive health and rights through a rights-based approach

Full sexual and reproductive health for all cannot be achieved without respecting, protecting and fulfilling human rights. In reality, however, implementing sexual and reproductive health projects using a Rights-Based Approach (RBA) can be challenging. International rights and local realities are sometimes far apart.

The conference “Rights and Realities in promoting sexual and reproductive health and rights” organised by Youth Incentives and World Population Foundation, November 10-11, 2008, in Rotterdam, The Netherlands, discussed a RBA to sexual and reproductive health in the realities of the working environments of participants, with the objective of reaching reproductive health for all by 2015.

What is a Rights-Based Approach?

The human rights norms, standards and principles are contained in international and regional treaties and declarations and include the principles of - among others - accountability, empowerment, participation and non-discrimination¹. When ratified, they are legally binding and states are obligated to protect, promote and fulfill these human rights.

A rights-based approach to health means integrating human rights norms and principles in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of health-related policies and programmes. These rights include human dignity, special attention for the needs and rights of vulnerable groups, and an emphasis on ensuring that health systems are made accessible to all. The principles of equality and freedom from discrimination are central, including notably freedom from discrimination on the basis of sex and gender roles. Integrating human rights into development also requires special efforts for empowering poor people, ensuring their participation in decision-making processes that touch their lives and incorporating accountability mechanisms which they can access².

The Rights-Based Approach to Sexual and Reproductive Health

The rights-based approach recognizes and respects all people as sexual and reproductive beings who have the right to correct information, access to services and education, but who also need to be protected from STIs/HIV, violence, coercion, discrimination, stigmatization and unwanted pregnancies. A rights-based approach calls for the conditions that make it possible for people to live their lives with confidence, pleasure and safety in all aspects of sexuality.

Why is a Rights-Based Approach to Sexual and Reproductive Health important?

Unwanted pregnancies, HIV infections, gender based violence, homophobic violence, sexual violence, lack of access to education for women and girls are among the consequences of not adhering to a rights-based approach. Without realizing sexual and reproductive health and rights, the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDG's) that relate to sexual and reproductive health and rights (especially MDG's 3, 4, 5 and 6) will not be achieved. The Cairo Programme of Action reflected in the target added to MDG 5 in 2005 “Reproductive Health for all in 2015” will remain far from being realized.

As many countries have recognized the sexual and reproductive health and rights of people by signing on to international treaties and declarations, governments - as primary duty bearers - can be held accountable to realize the rights and can be used to overcome these challenges. But institutions and civil society organizations have an as important role to play in realizing sexual and reproductive health and rights, both as rights holders and as duty bearers towards their target groups and towards holding their governments accountable. In fact every individual has a role to play, in his or her professional as well as private life.

¹ From www.unhcr.ch/development/right.html

² From www.who.int/trade/glossary/story054/en

To underline the importance of the Rights-Based Approach to Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, the 250 participants of the conference “Rights and Realities in promoting sexual and reproductive health and rights” (Rotterdam, 10-11 November 2008) from 5 different continents have adopted the following recommendations:

For sexual and reproductive health and rights to be realized human rights have to be applied to sexuality.

We, participants of this conference, believe that by putting rights based principles into practice, we will contribute towards reaching sexual and reproductive health and rights for all.

Therefore, we call upon ourselves, our colleagues of (I)NGOs and policy makers at all levels, to put rights based approaches into practices by:

- Advocating for and working towards the full implementation of the Program of Action of the International Conference on People and Development held in Cairo in 1994 and the Beijing Platform for Action
- Advocating towards the realization of the Millennium Development Goals, with a particular focus on MDG3 - gender equality - and the MDG5 - maternal health - target of reproductive health for all in 2015
- Ensuring meaningful participation of all stakeholders at all levels of decision making within our organizations and within government bodies
- Working towards rights based comprehensive sexuality education and sexual and reproductive health services for all with a particular focus on young people
- Strengthening a positive approach towards sexuality by promoting the conditions that make it possible for people to live their lives with confidence, pleasure and safety in all aspects of sexuality
- Promoting non-discrimination, empowerment, participation and accountability within our organizations, programmes and projects
- Monitoring governments' adherence to rights based treaties at the UN and regional level and acting when necessary to ensure governments honour their commitment
- Providing sufficient budget allocations and donor funds for development and implementation of policies and programs that promote sexual and reproductive health and rights at all levels and that enable meaningful participation of all stakeholders
- Bridging the gap between process oriented Rights Based Approaches and result oriented donor requirements by long-term commitments and process oriented results
- Developing and providing practical tools to apply the Rights Based Approach effectively

Make Rights Real

For more information contact:

Yvonne Bogaarts
y.bogaarts@wfp.org
Head Advocacy Department
World Population Foundation

Marijke Priester
m.priester@rng.org
Head Youth Incentives
Rutgers Nisso Group