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Paul Nelson

University of Pittsburgh - Main Campus

Ellen Dorsey

Wallace Global Fund

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The Social Practice of Human Rights: Charting the Frontiers of Research and Advocacy

2015 Conference of the University of Dayton Human Rights Center

Oct. 2-3, 2015, Dayton, Ohio

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Research Panel: Visualizing Rights

Presenters: Paul Nelson and Ellen Dorsey

Title: Who Practices Rights-Based Development? A Progress Report on Work at the Nexus of Human Rights and Development

Abstract: In 2003 we wrote in *World Development* that a growing nexus between human rights and development practice could transform both fields and advance struggles against extreme poverty, inequalities and patterns of rights violations. The present paper examines the work of international development and human rights agencies to update our understanding of human rights-inspired development work at the nexus. Examining work in the two sectors now, we see more significant changes among human rights agencies than among agencies in development. Some development actors have embraced human rights language and a handful use human rights principles and strategies to define project and advocacy priorities. But with important exceptions, development organizations have made mostly rhetorical changes, relabeling practices without making systematic programmatic changes. The label “rights-based” has been applied so freely to development work that it has generated skepticism about the value of rights-based approaches. We identify and analyze a set of conceptual, organizational and political constraints limiting the impact of rights-based approaches among development organizations.

Human rights organizations have made changes that may signal a more durable transformation. Many United Nations and international NGO actors have broadened their agendas and started, systematically or selectively, to work on ESCR, and many new or vastly expanded NGOs or networks work exclusively ESCR. They have developed promising methodologies, methods for judging country effort and performance, and deepened their ties to social movements and local advocates. Some initiatives are stretching and changing human rights NGOs’ organizational practice; among them we examine monitoring methods for economic and social rights, advocacy on countries’ extra-territorial obligations, and expanded work on the right to free, prior and informed consent. New agendas, new methods and work on new rights in economic and social policy signal that human rights agencies are a major locus of rights-based development work.

Keywords: rights-based development, human rights NGOs, economic rights, social rights, cultural rights

Biographies:

Paul Nelson is Associate Professor and director of the international development program at the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs, University of Pittsburgh. Before joining the university in 1998 he worked as policy analyst for several non-governmental organizations (NGOs). He is the author of *The World Bank and Non-Governmental Organizations: The Limits of Apolitical Development* (St. Martin’s, 1995), and coauthor, with Ellen Dorsey, of *New Rights Advocacy: Changing Strategies of Development and Human Rights NGOs* (Georgetown University Press, 2008). His other publications include articles,

chapters and reports on NGOs, transparency in international organizations, the World Bank, the Millennium Development Goals, and human rights and development. He is advisor to the US board of the international social investment and microfinance organization Oikocredit (<http://oikocreditusa.org/>), and serves on the board of the Global Initiative for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (<http://globalinitiative-escr.org/>). He earned his PhD. in International Development Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (1990).

Ellen Dorsey is an impassioned advocate for international human rights and environmental sustainability. Since 2008, she has served as executive director of the Wallace Global Fund. Under her leadership, the Fund adopted a new approach integrating grant making and investment strategies to promote its mission. Ellen came to the Fund from the Heinz Endowments, where she was the senior program officer in the Environment Program. She previously served as Executive Director of the Rachel Carson Institute and Associate Professor at Chatham University and founded the Human Rights and Environment Program of Amnesty International.

She has served on the board of numerous non-profit organizations, including the US Human Rights Network, Global Initiative on Economic and Social Rights, Shared Interest and Amnesty International USA, where she was Chair of the Board of Directors.

Her educational career includes a doctorate in political science from the University of Pittsburgh and a Fulbright Fellowship in South Africa during that country's historic transformation from Apartheid. She has lectured and written extensively in books, journals and new media outlets on the topic of contemporary social movements and effective strategies of non-governmental organizations. Most recently, Dorsey co-authored, along with Paul Nelson, *New Rights Advocacy: Changing Strategies of Development and Human Rights NGOs*, published by Georgetown University Press