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Human Rights-Based Activism: Lessons From Health Activism in South Africa and Brazil (abstract)

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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

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Research Panel: Case Studies in Human Rights Activism

Presenters: Kristi Heather Kenyon and Regiane Garcia

Title: Human Rights-Based Activism: Lessons From Health Activism in South Africa and Brazil

Abstract: Drawing on South Africa and Brazil's experiences of health activism, this paper aims to provide a full illustration of how human rights-based (HRB) activism can function as an influential agency-based social determinant of health. Social determinants of health (SDH) are usually understood as circumstances and structures that disadvantage individuals by increasing their vulnerability to disease and injury. SDH are typically conceived of as conditions that act upon individuals and communities who are relatively powerless to react against the health impacts of context such as poverty and marginalization.

In addition to this 'passive' understanding of SDH, we put forward an 'active' conception whereby SDH includes processes of participation and engagement throughout which individuals are able to use their own knowledge and actions to improve health outcomes for themselves and others. We examine this phenomenon through the case studies of HRB activism in Brazil around the national health council, and HRB activism on HIV in South Africa by the Treatment Action Campaign. Brazil's participatory experience has been described as one of the world's most important examples of citizens' engagement in policy making. South Africa's Treatment Action Campaign has received widespread recognition for its work linking health and rights education with mobilization.

Our case studies draw on fieldwork (including interviews, observation, document and legal analysis) carried out by Garcia in São Paulo and Brasília in 2014, and by Kenyon in the Ekurhuleni and Cape Town, South Africa offices of TAC in 2010 and 2011. Drawing on these notable cases we offer insight into ways that HRB activism can be understood as an influential agencybased social determinant of health for the fulfillment of health rights. We hope to spark new ideas of how health impacts of HRB approaches to health, including health activism, might be understood and measured in both countries, and elsewhere.

Keywords: human-rights-based activism, health activism, HIV activism, the right to health, social determinants of health.

Biographies:

Kristi Heather Kenyon is a SSHRC postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Political Science at Dalhousie University, and a postdoctoral fellow in the Centre for Human Rights at the University of Pretoria. She holds a PhD in Political Science from the University of British Columbia and an MA in the Theory and Practice of Human Rights from the University of Essex. Her work investigates human rights, activism, civil society and health in sub-Saharan Africa.

Regiane Garcia is a PhD candidate in the Law Faculty at the University of British Columbia. She holds a LL.M from the University of Toronto and from the University Mackenzie, Brazil. Her work falls in the intersection of law and policy, and focuses on questions that combine the role of constitutional rights in participatory policymaking arenas, with a particular focus on Brazil's public health context.