

CARE's Programmatic Evolution and Rights-Based Approaches

(Barbara Durr & Susan Farnsworth Feb. 17, 2004)

Since CARE's founding, its programs have changed to stay in touch with its evolving sense of purpose. The mission has always been about assisting vulnerable and poor people, from our CARE packages to refugees after World War II to the rebuilding of civil society in Rwanda today. Originally, we simply tried to get food to hungry people or to give them the implements and inputs they needed to grow their own. In the 1950s, CARE began to shift to address relief and development more broadly, and our understanding of how best to do that has continued to evolve over the last five decades.

CARE, like many other private and public agencies involved in relief and development, has come to recognize that some barriers exist that impede our addressing the problems of poverty. This is not to take away from the effectiveness of many of our programs; over the years much of our work has been at the forefront of relief and development. Our work on household livelihood security has provided us with a better understanding of not just the dynamics of poverty, such as the relative power relationships within a household and among households and authority structures, but also its more fundamental causes. We began to understand that without addressing the responsibilities of those in power to remove barriers to development and the exercise of rights, the effects of our programming would not be lasting. Despite our intention of bringing about fundamental change, we realized that our programs were often not sustainable.

Often when we left, the dynamics of the old situation overtook our changes: for example, small farmers and micro-entrepreneurs learned how to produce more and better products, but they could not prosper without access to markets; women who had proudly learned to grow nutritious foods from home gardens found that they were still the last to eat and did not benefit from these foods.

Learning from this, we knew that we had to ask different questions about how to address poverty and to do something different. Some other important contextual factors also weighed in and informed our thinking and practice.

Over the last two decades, local civil society organizations, including many capable local NGOs, have mushroomed in the countries where we work. We had worked with many of them, but only since the mid-1990s did we begin to really understand that we must partner with these critical local development actors—because they will be there after our projects are over and represent the possibility of sustainable change. Large institutional donors also began looking more to these local organizations as possible implementers of programs.

All of this was taking place in a rapidly changing political landscape. The dissolution of the Soviet Union transformed the international political context and in part spawned an increase in local ethnic and religious conflicts.

Almost five years ago, CARE International, facing questions about our future relevance, undertook a deep examination of our work and context, and from this we shaped a new vision and mission. The new CARE vision of ending world poverty has now compelled us to change

not just what we do but how we do it. We committed ourselves to finding lasting solutions to overcome poverty, and this meant that we needed to fight poverty at its roots.

The most important outgrowth of our self-examination was that we recognized the relevance of human rights to our vision. We, in effect, lifted our sight line from the poor communities where we work to the larger context of their poverty and asked: why? And so we began shifting our model from fulfilling poor people's needs to one of empowering the poor to claim what is rightfully theirs—a life with dignity in which they can fulfill their potential. We came to see, as did some other relief and development organizations, that internationally recognized human rights provide a unifying framework to address the barriers to development.

However, as CARE has begun to apply rights-based approaches in our programming around the world, we have faced some significant challenges. Our rights-based approach requires greater analytic capability, particularly of the political environment, as we seek to understand the underlying causes of poverty and to address them. Importantly, we are still working on understanding what methodologies we could use to understand underlying causes of poverty. Where our programs and projects are successful, we need faster organizational learning to successfully integrate new and creative approaches. We must also engage in deeper and more effective local partnerships with development actors where we facilitate change rather than implement projects.

We are still struggling to reach a shared understanding across the organization of what we mean by rights-based approaches, define what makes a successful intervention, and how to measure our rights-based work. But we need to be clear that in adopting rights-based approaches we are not leaving behind programming about needs. Rather, in contexts that require a response based on needs, we are trying to work smarter and tackle power dynamics head-on. To bring about sustainable change for poor people, we must begin addressing tough issues such as governance, corruption, and discrimination.

The organization's increased public policy advocacy activities have underscored many of these challenges, and at the same time opened new doors to integrate our work from the field up to policy levels.

Ultimately, the way we will know if we have made a difference is when we see more well nourished and healthy children, more girls (and boys) getting a good education, more healthy and skilled women and men able to earn a reasonable living, more people with sanitation and safe drinking water, and more biodiversity preserved. These are things that can be measured, and they are part of the UN's Millennium Development Goals, to which we subscribe.

As staff around the world have thought about the implications for our programming and the behaviors needed to execute our new approach, we developed a set of Programming Principles that were officially adopted by CARE International (see attached). These Programming Principles are a set of markers for where our work is headed. While we recognize that we are not there yet, our experience and learnings tell us that we are on the right path.

Over the last year, CARE has also taken stock of how we are aligned organizationally to fulfill our new vision. In early 2003, a set of extensive internal consultations revealed that many staff still saw a considerable gap between our vision and what we actually do. To address these concerns, we have embarked on a process to better align our work with our vision.

We hope that the alignment process, still a work in progress, will enable us to make greater progress toward delivering on our vision. And by doing so, we will have further advanced in our sense of purpose, our relevance to the world, and our value to the poor we serve.

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CARE International Programming Principles

In order to fulfil CARE's vision and mission, all of CARE's programming should conform with the following Programming Principles, contained within the CI Code. These Principles are characteristics that should inform and guide, at a fundamental level, the way we work. They are not optional. These Programming Principles are as follows:¹

Principle 1: Promote Empowerment

We stand in solidarity with poor and marginalized people, and support their efforts to take control of their own lives and fulfil their rights, responsibilities and aspirations. We ensure that key participants and organisations representing affected people are partners in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of our programmes.

Principle 2: Work with partners

We work with others to maximise the impact of our programs, building alliances and partnerships with those who offer complementary approaches, are able to adopt effective programming approaches on a larger scale, and/or who have responsibility to fulfil rights and reduce poverty through policy change and enforcement.

Principle 3: Ensure Accountability and Promote Responsibility

We seek ways to be held accountable to poor and marginalized people whose rights are denied. We identify individuals and institutions with an obligation toward poor and marginalized people, and support and encourage their efforts to fulfil their responsibilities.

Principle 4: Address Discrimination

In our programs and offices we address discrimination and the denial of rights based on sex, race, nationality, ethnicity, class, religion, age, physical ability, caste, opinion or sexual orientation.

Principle 5: Promote the non-violent resolution of conflicts

We promote just and non-violent means for preventing and resolving conflicts at all levels, noting that such conflicts contribute to poverty and the denial of rights.

Principle 6: Seek Sustainable Results

As we address underlying causes of poverty and rights denial, we develop and use approaches that ensure our programmes result in lasting and fundamental improvements in the lives of the poor and marginalized with whom we work.

We hold ourselves accountable for enacting behaviours consistent with these principles, and ask others to help us do so, not only in our programming, but in all that we do.

¹ Principles as approved by the CI Board, November 2003.