

Global Norms, Organisational Change: Framing the Rights-Based Approach at ActionAid

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Abstract

This article examines the adoption of the rights-based approach (RBA) to development at ActionAid International, focusing in particular on its Education Theme. Although there has been a considerable volume of work that examines the rise of RBA, including in the pages of *Third World Quarterly*, the power dynamics and conflict involved in shifting to RBA have largely gone unnoticed and explored. Using the methodological tools of discourse analysis and social movement theory on strategic issue framing, I examine how ActionAid leadership worked to ‘sell’ RBA to somewhat-resistant staff and partners. I argue that ActionAid struggled to reconcile its commitment to global rights norms with the ongoing needs-based programming at country-level. This raises important questions about the power dynamics involved when an NGO undergoes a process of organisational change, even when, as is the case with RBA, this is widely seen as a progressive and desirable transition.

Keywords: rights-based approach; strategic issue framing; non-governmental organisations

Introduction

In a recent issue of *Third World Quarterly*, Paul Gready applies the theory of organisational cosmopolitanism to a case-study of organisational change at ActionAid International, looking specifically at how this NGO has shifted to a human rights-based approach to development.¹ This important contribution adds to a growing body of work exploring the rights-based approach (RBA) among nongovernmental organisations and at ActionAid in particular.² While these accounts offer essential insights into, and critiques of, RBA as practiced by development organisations, there is a general lack of attention paid to *how* organisations make such a radical change in philosophy and mandate. Approaching development interventions as an instance of human rights work rather than need-based charitable work is a monumental shift in thinking and requires an overhaul of how staff and partners operate in the field. One could not expect such a transition to proceed easily or automatically. Yet a reading of the literature may lead to this impression: there has been very little academic work that explores the internal tensions and conflict associated with transitioning to a rights-based approach.

This article seeks to address this gap by exploring how RBA was rolled out across ActionAid's Education Theme. I argue that this process was contentious, requiring ActionAid's London-based International Education Team (IET) to negotiate between its own strong commitment to rights-based principles and resistance from staff and partners operating at country-level. Borrowing from social movement theory on strategic issue-framing, as well as international relations theory on international normal dynamics, I examine how ActionAid constructed and re-constructed its rights-based approach to education development. I argue that the process of framing education as a right was highly fluid, influenced at various points by both global development norms and by the internal organisational dynamics of ActionAid. Although issue-framing is generally applied to the process by which a movement or organisation attracts *external* support for a cause, I offer a novel usage of the theory by examining how it applies to the process of 'selling' organisational change to a *domestic* audience. In so doing, I argue that there is not a single target audience for a given strategic issue-frame. Successful frames are those that are able to simultaneously speak to the culture and identity of multiple stakeholders.

I have chosen to focus on ActionAid's Education Theme as this area is widely recognised as an organisational strength of ActionAid³ and for having particular success at mainstreaming RBA.⁴ Additionally, the right to education has been well-established in global governance agreements since the 1990 World Conference on Education for All. Currently 164 governments have signed on to *Dakar Framework for Action* which affirms education as a basic human right and identifies six Education for All (EFA) goals to be achieved by 2015. Thus the idea of education as a right is a powerful global norm, and, as will be discussed subsequently, ActionAid frames its education rights work to resonate with this international climate.

This article uses the tools of discourse analysis to understand how RBA has been framed by ActionAid's IET, and what this can tell us about the context and power-structures in which this discourse is embedded. I focus on four key documents created since the advent of the organisation's rights-based approach. These documents are: the 2002 *Global Education Review*, which was the first significant document to assess the impact of RBA on education at ActionAid; the 2005 *Education Strategic Plan, 2005-2010*; the 2007 manual *Education Rights: A Guide for Practitioners and Activists*; and the 2009 *Education Review*, including the IET management response to this review. In addition, I was granted access to a number of internal documents relating to the publication and dissemination of these four texts. All these documents were

written or commissioned by the IET, and primarily disseminated among ActionAid country programmes and local partners, so they give a good indication of how the IET framed the rights-based approach *internally* to its staff and partners. They also reveal how global norms have impacted the way RBA is defined at ActionAid and how this has shifted in the past decade.

The following section outlines the theories of strategic-issue framing and international norm dynamics as they pertain to this particular study. I then move on to examine the four documents described above, focussing on how education rights is defined and framed in each, how this has changed over time, and what this can tell us about strategic issue-framing and organisational change. In the final section I offer some conclusions about the transition to RBA at ActionAid and discuss the implications of this study for future work in the field.

Strategic frame alignment and international norm dynamics

A recurring argument in social movement literature is that activists and movements derive much of their power and influence from their ability to name and define moral and political issues.⁵ Social movement theorists call this process *issue-framing*, and the resulting products are *collective action frames*. Framing is a central part of a movement or organisation's political strategy, designed to persuade key targets about the moral necessity of a certain political/social change and their role in fostering that change. Scholarly attention to framing arose in the 1980s as part of a general wave of interest in interpretive, constructed aspects of social movements, as well as a growing critique of the then-dominant structuralist paradigm.

The seminal work in this vein was Snow et al's 1986 *Frame Alignment Processes, Micromobilization, and Movement Participation*. These authors discerned three dimensions of collective action frames: a diagnostic element, which identifies a problem and assigns blame; and a prognostic element, which advances possible solutions; and a motivational element, which encourages action.⁶ For a frame to be successful, its diagnostic, prognostic and motivational claims must resonate with the target audience: they must be *credible*, in the sense that they are evidence-based and draw on recognised expertise; and they must be *salient* and have *narrative fidelity*, in that they fit with the extant culture of the audience, the 'everyday experience' made up of shared norms and values, ideologies and practices.⁷ Thus for social movement theorists,

attention to framing serves to highlight the role of strategic actors who actively pursue certain goals through the deliberate construction of discourse.

The rights-based approach to development provides a good example of a successful collective action frame. It offers a clear diagnosis of the problem of under-development: individuals and communities are poor because they are unable to exercise their legal, political, economic and social rights. The solution is to re-frame development as an entitlement. Thus we see RBA across a wide variety of organisations using the same language of ‘rights-bearers and duty-bearers’, ‘participation’, ‘accountability’ and ‘empowerment’. Because development interventions carried out under the RBA frame are based on international human rights mechanisms, they have the appearance of being straightforward and measurable, which lends credibility and efficacy to RBA. The measurability of RBA also opens up important political opportunities for development organisations operating under a rights-frame. Keck and Sikkink have argued that NGOs using a human rights methodology are essentially ‘promoting change by reporting facts’.⁸ By framing development as a right, NGOs give themselves clear and specific tasks to convince the international community to take action on a particular development issue: they must document the lack of a certain right, demonstrate that governments are responsible for safeguarding this right under international law, and expose the situation nationally or internationally.⁹

Issue frames like RBA are thus constructed to speak to the broader cultural and political environment in which a movement is embedded. The dynamic relationship between global norms and frame-construction has been examined in international relations literature on international norm dynamics, most notably in the work of Finnemore and Sikkink and Khagram, Riker and Sikkink.¹⁰ This body of work highlights how the emergence of new norms is a contentious process: new ideas enter a pre-existing normative arena and may clash with previously accepted ideas. Strategic actors – what these authors term ‘norm entrepreneurs’ - must respond to the broader environment and frame their idea in a way that fits with, or at least responds to, the ‘logic of appropriateness’¹¹ in their given context. Norm entrepreneurs are generally individuals and non-governmental organisations working at the domestic level, pushing for state acceptance of a new norm. In the initial emergence phase, pressure from these actors is the main impetus behind normative change at state level. But once a number of governments have adopted a new norm, it reaches a tipping point, after which countries begin to

‘sign on’ even in the absence of domestic pressure. Finnemore and Sikkink refer to this stage as the ‘norm cascade’, during which ‘international and transnational norm influences become more important than domestic politics for effecting norm change’.¹²

I would argue that the rights-based approach has gained such widespread acceptance among development organisations that it can be understood as having reached the stage of ‘norm cascade’. Rights discourse is widely applied in the field of development education, illustrated by the fact that the vast majority of UN member states have signed on to the *Dakar Framework for Action* and have therefore committed themselves, in writing if not in practice, to recognizing education as a basic human right. Crucial to the success of the RBA frame is its salience with widely-held norms around human rights. Although the idea that all individuals hold certain inalienable, universal rights was not new in the 1990s, this decade saw a profound growth in international attention to human rights law – the development of what could be termed the human rights master-frame, ‘the mother of all successful transnational framing efforts’.¹³ Scholars have pointed to the end of the Cold War as the crucial turning point towards a ‘universalistic meta-package’¹⁴ based on the values of western enlightenment and capitalist democracy, fueled by (and fueling) rampant economic globalization, and typified by UN mega-conferences that sought coordinated solutions to what were increasingly seen as global issues based on individualistic human rights. It is in this international climate that RBA emerged as a new way to frame development interventions.

As the above discussion indicates, the construction of issue-frames is heavily influenced by external context. Indeed, virtually all scholarly work on issue-framing has looked at how frames are constructed with an external audience in mind: to gain adherents or funders or to change the way the public thinks about an issue. Snow et al developed the term ‘frame alignment’ to describe the process by which social movement organisations deliberately link their frames with those of prospective members, allies or resource providers.¹⁵ I will argue in this chapter that framing is also used to ‘sell’ a new idea internally to members of an organisation, and that this process is key to successful frame alignment. Organisational leadership must think strategically about how to promote a shift in mandate to staff and partners, how to frame this transformation in a way that will minimise internal conflict and disruption while at the same time allowing the new frame to resonate with the targeted external audience. By focussing both on internal and external audiences, I reveal how advocacy organisations are best understood as

inhabiting multiple, overlapping social spaces. The following case study reveals that frame alignment does not proceed automatically or in a straight-forward fashion: it is a highly dynamic and fluid process shaped by internal and external pressures and requiring constant negotiation and re-construction.

Case study: framing the right to education at ActionAid

Introduction

In 1999, ActionAid formally adopted the rights-based approach (RBA) across all sectors and country programs with a new five-year strategy, *Fighting Poverty Together*. The Education Theme, led by the International Education Team (IET) sought to streamline its programming to fit this new mandate. This represented a significant change: where previously the organisation had focussed on providing educational services to ‘needy’ populations, it was now focussing on helping these populations assert their right to publicly-funded education. The adoption of RBA provides an example of what Snow et al. have termed frame transformation, a radical shift involving the replacement of old norms with new ones.¹⁶ I examine this transformation through an analysis of four key documents, highlighting how new strategic frames are rolled out across an organisation and how these frames must respond to both global norms and to the domestic culture of the organisation.

Global Education Review 2002

The 2002 *Global Education Review* was the result of an organisation-wide survey to assess the impact of the transition to RBA on education programming and to explore ‘the extent to which our education work has moved in line with our strategic direction’.¹⁷ This was carried out through a survey of 20 countries in which ActionAid operates as well as six in-depth reviews from ActionAid offices in Nepal, Nigeria, Uganda, Ghana, Ethiopia and Guatemala. One of the central concerns of the review was to determine the extent of convergence between rights-based advocacy work at national and global levels and grassroots programming. The IET was entirely committed to engaging communities in rights activism in order to establish universal access to education and to address a root cause of poverty. But, as I will argue in this section, the way the

IET framed RBA in this period revealed a struggle between the desire to solidify rights-work across the education theme, and a commitment to decentralised, participatory decision-making.

As part of the preparatory process for the *Global Education Review*, the IET convened a workshop bringing together education leaders and consultants from four country programmes (AA Nepal, AA Ethiopia, AA Ghana and AA Nigeria) to plan the review process, generate material for distribution, and provide feedback on a draft of the review survey. Examining the report produced at this workshop¹⁸ reveals that managing the transition from needs-based service delivery to rights-based advocacy was a significant challenge. There was general agreement that service delivery may still form an aspect of education work at local levels, possibly as an ‘entry point’ to the assertion of rights, but that ‘the way services may be delivered using a ‘rights based approach will differ from traditional ‘service delivery’.¹⁹ Participants were tasked with creating a chart to compare rights-based and service-delivery approaches that could be distributed across all country programmes, drawing a clear distinction between the two approaches.²⁰

A few interesting points emerge from this chart. Out of sixteen comparative points, six touch in some way on the idea of participatory empowerment - of rights-advocacy being something demanded at the grassroots that changes the locus of power from ActionAid to the communities in which it works. RBA is associated with decentralisation as opposed to service-delivery which is said to require more centralised planning and control. As ActionAid was in the midst of an institutional overhaul, focussed on decentralisation and a shift of power from London to Johannesburg, framing the rights-based approach as one based on decentralised power provided a neat convergence of theoretical framework and institutional form. Also, recalling that the *Global Education Review* was designed to bring greater coherence between local practice and advocacy campaigning, it was important to frame education rights work as something requiring local community engagement.

Yet, as surveys carried out in 2002 revealed, many country programs were struggling to implement the rights-based approach in their education work. The most commonly cited obstacle to rights-based work was wide-spread poverty, and the resulting desire for immediate and tangible services. Closely related was a lack of understanding about the right to education. Quotes from survey respondents indicate common concerns about how to carry out rights-based education work:

The community's understanding of rights or about national constitution is very low. People in villages (are) not aware that education is a right, rather feel that it is a favour of the government to provide education.²¹

The rights-based approach is proving difficult to be understood by both implementers, partners and recipients of development initiatives. The service delivery approach has always been preferred by people at all levels as tangible results can be produced through this approach..²²

The conflict situation in which we have been working for 8 years ... is not suitable to have a rights based approach to education.²³

ActionAid itself acknowledged that 'poor communities are often unable to see the broader picture and gains of the rights-based approach as against service delivery'.²⁴ This calls into question the idea that RBA is about decentralised bottom-up activism. What is emerging is an image of RBA as a something that must be taught to poor people who are sceptical about its applicability to their everyday lives.

Despite the fact that many country-level programs and staff members were struggling to transition to rights-based education work, and a significant number were still carrying out traditional service delivery programs, the *Global Education Review* made clear these activities were considered a direct contradiction of RBA. It recommended education programming shift focus to learning for rights empowerment, and that if ActionAid was needed for basic education provision, this should at all times be done with and through the government.

If, having mobilised demand for education, we respond by simply delivering the services ourselves, this defeats the purpose, reduces government responsibility and acts to demobilise people. In those cases where we are already engaged in service delivery without a clear rights-based framework and without clear means for achieving wider change or impact, projects may need to be phased out or closed down.²⁵

There was some room for educational services, but only if these were directly connected to raising awareness about rights. *Reflect*, a method for teaching adult literacy for which ActionAid had been awarded at UN Literacy Prize, and which was at that point operating in 350 programs across 60 countries, was highlighted as an example of rights-based education programming. Originally conceived as a fusion of literacy and empowerment, *Reflect* was re-framed under RBA as an 'operating system', where participants develop an analysis that forms the foundation for rights work and strengthens local activism. Interestingly, the *Review* argues

that practitioners have found *Reflect* to be more pedagogically effective when used as a rights-based approach than simply as a literacy method.²⁶ Thus, in a way, we can see *Reflect* as an olive branch extended to those still interested in delivering non-formal education bridging needs-based and rights-based approaches. This would be particularly effective as *Reflect* was ActionAid's most widely-used non-formal education program at this point.

The *Review* made a clear distinction between current education programming and what had come before: service delivery was furthering the goal of privatization, weakening the government of developing countries and their ties to the citizenry. The RBA framework was offered as a resistance to a neo-liberal, privatization agenda, 'a line in the sand against the tide of privatisation'.²⁷ Many of the countries in which ActionAid works have a common history of western colonisation and economic control through structural adjustment policies. By framing service delivery as part of this history, and RBA as a resistance to it, ActionAid was likely able to appeal to the political leanings of much of its country-level staff. Framing rights-based work as anti-neoliberalism was also designed to stir up controversy, a tactic that the IET felt would help get international attention by 'capture(ing) our positioning with poor people (rather than for them) and generat(ing) passionate engagement'.²⁸

A final aspect of the *Review* worth mentioning is the heavy emphasis on local, empowering understandings of rights. It acknowledges that what 'free education' means will differ by context and that starting from a local definition of rights is crucial. This emphasis on local understandings and identities is directly related to an idea of rights-work as empowerment and ActionAid's role as catalyst: 'We must...*facilitate* poor people to become active agents in negotiating for their rights, *enabling* them to define for themselves what 'free quality basic education' means'.²⁹

By contrast, there is almost no mention of legal rights at any point in this document. The survey responses indicate that out of twenty countries, only three make any mention of using legal frameworks in their rights-work. At no point does the *Review* mention international rights frameworks relevant to education, such as the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Surprisingly, even the *Dakar Framework for Action*, which identifies the Education for All goals, is scarcely mentioned. It appears that the IET shied away from any emphasis on international rights norms in favour of promoting the locally-based, decentralised framing of RBA. At a number of points, the *Review* emphasises that rights work must start from the local

level and be based on the experience and identities of those whose right to education is denied rather than ‘an abstract notion of rights’:

It is important to start with a clear sense of the identity of the people who are asserting their rights. This gives us a stronger basis to building a rights-based intervention – much more powerful than starting from an abstract notion of rights. It is this basis on people and their identities, which will provide energy, passion, outrage and effective mobilisation.³⁰

The above discussion indicates that during this early stage of RBA, the IET faced a significant challenge in framing rights-based education work. The team firmly believed that RBA would result in an expansion of educational access as well as the empowerment of disadvantaged individuals and communities. There was, however, significant resistance from local staff and communities who were not yet convinced about the benefit of rights-work and who expected ActionAid to continue to deliver much-needed educational services. This highlights the challenges of the decentralised organisational model: ‘there is no central control which pressurises people to pursue a certain line of work’.³¹ Instead, the IET had to convince ‘staff and partners to internalise a rights-based perspective in education work’³², and this was done by framing RBA as locally-focussed and avoiding the use of international frameworks, and by associating it with anti-neoliberal struggles and the well-regarded *Reflect* method.

The Education Strategic Plan 2005-2010

The *Education Strategic Plan 2005-2010* marked a significant departure in how ActionAid’s IET framed education rights to its staff and partners. We see a deeper entrenchment of the divide between rights advocacy and service delivery, with the latter virtually eliminated all together. We also see a much stronger emphasis on international and legal rights frameworks and less of a focus on local understandings of rights. In order to solidify this new strategy across ActionAid, and recognizing that some were still struggling with the move to rights-based education work, the IET published *Education Rights: A Handbook for Activists and Practitioners* in 2007. Together, these two documents offer a clear glimpse into the evolution of the education rights framework at ActionAid.

The *Education Strategic Plan* incorporated six strategic goals, each of which was elaborated with four to six ‘indicative activities’. The most obvious point that can be gleaned is

that the activities are directed at the national and international level: out of a total of thirty indicative activities, only eight dealt with local-level interventions. Goals 1 ('We will secure **constitutional rights** to basic education') and 3 ('We will secure **adequate resources** from governments and donors to ensure effective delivery of education for all') focus entirely on activities targeting national and international policy. These include, for example, 'Working with national parliaments and the media to place the right to education on the national agenda'; 'Undertaking targeted legal work to enforce rights'; 'building sustained pressure on international donors'; and 'challenging IMF/World Bank imposed macroeconomic norms'.³³

When local communities or activities are mentioned in the six strategic goals, it is often as a way to bolster national and international campaigning with members and information. Examples include documenting who is left out of schooling, exposing violations of the right to education, and broadening support for national coalitions. There is also attention paid to building and strengthening Parent-Teacher Associations and student groups, but this, too, could be seen as a chance to feed into national level campaigns. There is a strong focus on challenging gender-based inequality in education at the local level (this is mentioned in both goals 2 and 5) and education to address and reduce instances of HIV/AIDS (goals 2, 3 and 5).³⁴ Although these areas of education equality are unquestionably important, it should be pointed out that gender and HIV/AIDS were priorities for ActionAid International, and so their prominence in the *Education Strategy Plan* may be more a reflection of international focus than grassroots demand. This observation in no way takes away from the very real need for ActionAid and its partners to deal with discriminatory access to education. What is notable is the strategic use of grassroots programming to bolster and lend credibility to national and international advocacy campaigning, rather than to define the agenda for this campaigning.

In the *Education Strategic Plan*, the IET tried for the first time to define the rights based approach to education, emphasising citizens as rights-holders and states as duty-bearers, and highlighting constitutional and legislative provisions. This indicates a movement away from local understanding of rights towards a more concrete, universal definition of the right to education applicable across ActionAid country programmes. This is a marked difference from the *Global Education Review*, which favoured a local understanding of rights over legal frameworks. The universality of rights is furthered under Goal 4: 'Integrating broad human rights education into school curricula and practices so that all children who access education learn

about their basic rights and the history of struggles to secure rights'.³⁵ Again we see a shift from locally-rooted rights to universal norms.

Education Rights: A Handbook for Practitioners and Activists

Education Rights: A Handbook for Practitioners and Activists was published in 2007. It was heavily based on the *Education Strategic Plan 2005-2010*'s six Strategic Goals, but with more concrete and defined program for implementing RBA. *Education Rights* was disseminated across every ActionAid country programme and other development NGOs and organisations, and was published through the Global Campaign for Education. Although written/edited by a member of ActionAid's IET, it involved the input of civil society actors within and outside the development education field. In this way, *Education Rights* was a major effort on the part of the IET to promote its idea of education rights-work both inside and outside ActionAid.

Education Rights was designed to help ActionAid staff and partners use a legal rights framework. The International Education Team hired a lawyer intern to research legal and constitutional rights to education, and references to these sources are found throughout the handbook. Practitioners and activists are encouraged to frame their work in terms of international conventions and national legislation and to build alliances with human rights organisations and lawyers.³⁶ Fully ten pages of the handbook are dedicated to preparing a legal case for the right to education, including steps to take a case to the international level if domestic governments are unresponsive.³⁷ For the first time, the IET defines the rights-based approach in wholly legal terms, based on universal rather than locally-contextualised norms:

Taking rights, as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), as its basis, a human rights-based approach views poverty as an abuse of human rights. These rights are upheld in international law through the International Bill of Rights and subsequent human rights treaties. Human Rights are the 'minimum standards' needed in order to live a life of dignity, they are indivisible, inalienable and universal – by definition they belong to every human. If a national government does not respect, protect and fulfil human rights for every woman and man then it is in violation of its obligations.³⁸

Despite the use of universal/ legal rights discourse, it was still of crucial importance to the IET that education rights was framed as something rooted in local experience. The linking of grassroots activism with national and international campaigning remained absolutely central to

the RBA framework, as was made clear in the introduction of *Education Rights*: ‘What is now clearer than ever is the importance of strengthening the voices of the poor and marginalised, while at the same time engaging with international and national power holders’.³⁹ On the one hand, grassroots engagement was important because it ‘is the only way to ensure an active and empowered community, which will demand quality education from their government long after we have moved on’. At the same time, ‘grassroots experience enhances the impact and legitimacy of work at national and international levels’.⁴⁰ It is this last point that receives more elaboration in *Education Rights*: as was seen with the 2005-2010 strategy, more focus is on local-level activities that feed into national and international campaigns than on activities whose main focus is community empowerment. So, for example, school budget analysis is linked with monitoring national education spending and understanding the impact of IMF policies; local school committees are linked with national coalitions which are linked regionally and globally.

The first and fifth chapters of *Education Rights* contained significant discussion of the use of non-professional teachers. The use of these teachers was described as a violation of the right to education, linked to poor quality schools, the privatization of education and the undermining of the teaching profession. It was recommended to forge alliances with teachers’ unions at local, district and national levels as a key part of the campaign for the right to education. It was also recommended that ActionAid staff and partners gather data on non-professional teaching to directly challenge NGOs involved in non-formal education: ‘The local group could look at the impact of NFE provision.... Asking how NFE provision has impacted on public education provision. As well as looking at who are the teachers and what training they have received’.⁴¹

This recommendation stands in stark contrast to the reality in many ActionAid country programmes, where the running of non-formal education centres was still being carried out. In fact, many ActionAid country programmes were themselves supporting non-professional teachers.⁴² By contrast, the IET had been forging strong links with teachers’ unions through Education International the Global Campaign for Education. The Parktonian Recommendations, created by ActionAid and a range of national teachers unions, had strongly linked public education and professional teaching with the EFA goals.⁴³ Thus the emphasis on working with teachers’ unions reflected the priorities of the IET rather than the reality in local communities in which rights work was to be carried out.

Education Strategic Plan and *Education Rights* provide a clear image of the way the rights-based approach to education had evolved by mid-decade. The IET had put considerable work into disseminating a strong legal rights discourse across the organisation, chiefly through the publication of the *Education Rights* handbook, and wanted their very strong belief in RBA for education work to catch on among country programmes and local partners. However, ActionAid's decentralised power structure made it difficult to enforce a standardised model of RBA. The dissemination of key documents like those discussed above was the chief means of persuading staff and partners to implement a cohesive approach to rights-based education. These documents reveal that the IET remained committed to encouraging local-level rights work as the basis of their advocacy, emphasizing that their grassroots programming is 'the reason we have the credibility to convene others and to get a seat at national and international policy tables'.⁴⁴ In practice, however, the IET's rights discourse was increasingly informed by its own global mandates rather than local experience.

Education Review 2005-2009

The IET commissioned a second review of its education work in 2009, timed to reflect on the 2005-2010 strategy period and to inform the strategy that would take shape in 2011-2012. Like the 2002 *Global Education Review*, this document included in-depth surveys of over twenty ActionAid country programmes and local level partners, designed to 'critically examine ActionAid International's education work to date, to draw out lessons, learning and recommendations for the way forward'.⁴⁵ A central concern of the 2009 review was the impact of RBA on education work across ActionAid, at local, national and international levels. This review was followed by a management response, generated by the IET, reflecting on the findings and recommendations of the review and offering tentative proposals for a new education strategy. Analysis of both documents indicates how ActionAid's framing of education rights was beginning to shift by the end of the decade.

ActionAid country-level staff were surveyed on the extent to which they framed and designed their work around the rights-based approach. 20 of 22 indicated that 'all programs are designed using RBA',⁴⁶ indicating significant uptake of RBA since 2002. The survey also revealed a high degree of convergence about the right to education among staff and partners, with almost full agreement that rights are universal and inalienable, and that the state is primarily

responsible for safeguarding these rights. Country-level staff indicated significant awareness of national and international rights frameworks, with 23 out of 27 identifying as highly-familiar with the national constitution and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and 22 indicating the same about the UDHR. Local level partners indicated similar level of familiarity. Respondents also indicated that ActionAid had been instrumental in contextualizing these instruments within their respective education rights campaigns.⁴⁷

Interestingly, six respondents indicated that although they were highly familiar with international human rights instruments, they felt that they had limited applicability to national campaigns: ‘the instruments are not easy to use in Pakistan as they are not very familiar with [them in] local education departments’;⁴⁸ ‘International human rights instruments are weak instruments in terms of their enforceability at national level’.⁴⁹

The above findings indicate a number of important points. To begin with, the RBA frame was clearly successful: there was significant coherence across ActionAid and the vast majority of staff and partners had internalised the idea of education as a universal right and the role of government as duty-bearer. It is significant, however, that some respondents were highly familiar with international frameworks despite the fact that they were not useful for their own campaign work. This suggests that the legalistic interpretation of education rights espoused in *Education Rights*, which had included in-depth discussion of international rights frameworks, influenced the definition of RBA across ActionAid, if not always the practice. Similarly, over half of the respondents had never heard of RBA before it was introduced by ActionAid.⁵⁰ This indicates that, although the rights-based approach had become widely-adopted by development organisations, the version of RBA used by ActionAid education staff was shaped by the organisation’s leadership – a testament to the IET’s role in defining and framing rights-work.

A key issue that emerged from *Education Review* was the continued tension between a rights-based approach and service-delivery approach to education. The survey revealed that 19 country education leads (68%) agreed that ActionAid should only provide education services in emergency situations, which means that nearly one-third disagreed or were neutral. Among local partners there was even more divergence between the two approaches. Nearly 25% of local partners indicated that the majority of their funding goes to service delivery rather than advocacy work, and 9 of 22 considered service delivery as ‘a crucial element of the Rights Based Approach’, a statement which directly contradicted the definition of RBA promoted by

ActionAid and the IET. A number of respondents indicated that, although they agree theoretically with RBA, in practice service provision is needed in situations where the government cannot fulfill its duty.⁵¹ This perspective was particularly strong among respondents from Africa:

ActionAid Somaliland is a resource poor country programmeEstablishing non-formal centres and supporting public schools to increase access to basic education is the most significant innovation of our education work.⁵²

If children need to go to school and a government is not able or unwilling, and if AAI has the means ... they are morally and duty-bound to give children education from their own money.⁵³

All of the individuals and organisations I met were in complete agreement with the change of direction [to RBA] but also strongly believed it should not be an either or choice..... For the continued credibility of AAG and in order to maintain the trust, confidence and commitment of communities the RBA must be delivered alongside an element of service delivery.⁵⁴

The IET took seriously the recommendations of the 2009 *Education Review*, a testament to the importance ActionAid leadership places on critical self-reflection. In the management response, there was open recognition that a divide between policy and practice had emerged and that this was largely due to framing RBA as against service-delivery work. The IET acknowledged that the two approaches need not work in opposition and that services could be delivered within a rights-based approach. This would require more of a focus on RBA methods “it is not so much what you do but how you do it (you can build a school in a traditional paternalistic way responding to immediate needs or you can use the process of building a school to mobilise people around education rights).”⁵⁵

Guided by the recommendations from *Education Review*, the IET outlined a new education strategy that would ‘provide a simple and practical framework that will help unite work at local, national and international levels – linking programme engagement to policy and campaigning’. The linking of local, national and global level work remains central to how ActionAid frames its approach to education, but now there is a deliberate effort to link programming and policy as well. This was further emphasized through a pared-down and cohesive set of goals, ‘framed under a uniting goal of seeking to achieve *education for social change*’. The six strategic goals elaborated in *Education Strategic Plan* were streamlined into three core focus areas: promoting

quality schools which respect child rights; re-building *Reflect* for women's literacy and empowerment; and securing financing to achieve quality education.⁵⁶

Only tentative conclusions can be made about the framing of education rights at ActionAid since 2009. It is likely that the proposals discussed above were changed to some degree in the 2012-2017 strategy, and only time will tell how new strategies will be manifested and translated at local, national and global levels. What is clear, however, is that by 2009, the IET accepted the need to integrate service-delivery into RBA rather than to attempt to shut it out altogether. This was a tentative move – management remained cautious of ‘opening the floodgates to the comfort zone of simple infrastructure projects which are wrapped up in rights based rhetoric’.⁵⁷ But it is still significant as it shows that the implementation of RBA was impacting how the framework was defined by the IET, and the voices of country-level staff were being heard in the London office.

Conclusions

Strategic issue framing is generally seen as something that a movement or organisation does to attract external support for a particular cause. In this paper, I have shown that framing is also a strategy adopted during periods of organisational change in order to bring staff and partners on board. By examining the shift to a rights-based approach at ActionAid as an instance of frame transformation, I have illuminated the contentious nature of this change. While there has been significant scholarship on rise of RBA for development, including in this pages of this journal, very little attention has been paid to how this radical shift in mandate is “sold” within and across organisations. Power structures and conflict involved in shifting to RBA have largely gone unexplored. The International Education Team at ActionAid has been unquestionably committed to advancing education as a human right, and its efforts at reframing development interventions in terms of rights (rather than needs) is an important means to combat both paternalistic aid models and the neoliberal privatisation agenda. Yet just because we might agree with a particular issue-frame does not mean we should leave it unexamined.

In its education work, ActionAid has consistently framed RBA as something based in local, grassroots experience. This is an important part of ActionAid's identity as an organisation committed to participatory decision-making and grassroots activism. Yet the power to propose and define RBA rested with the London-based IET, which promoted a specific version of

education rights at odds with local practice. Furthermore, the way RBA was defined by ActionAid was increasingly influenced by international norms and international policy agendas, and the sort of rights-work promoted by the IET reflected ActionAid's global advocacy priorities rather than the experience of country-level staff.

At the same time, it is important to recognise that ActionAid is a highly decentralised organisation, and there was no way 'force' country level staff and partners to stop carrying out education services and to adopt a cohesive rights-based agenda. Thus even ten years after the introduction of RBA, many ActionAid country programs continued to carry out educational service delivery despite the IET's strong stance against this practice. This highlights that the transition to RBA was neither straight-forward nor automatic. This was a slow process during which the IET could only encourage and facilitate, using the tools of strategic issue-framing through the dissemination of the documents discussed here.

More recently, the IET has begun to acknowledge the need to bring service-delivery into RBA rather than to see the two as existing in opposition. Its rights-based approach may well be re-framed to incorporate this new stance. This highlights the fluid and dynamic nature of framing processes and the fact that successful frames must be crafted with multiple audiences in mind. As shown in this case study, ActionAid's frame transformation required constant re-definition and review. It evolved considerably in the period under study as the IET sought to negotiate between the needs and experiences of its grassroots network and its increasing involvement in global educational governance and advocacy.

Ultimately this has allowed ActionAid to craft a highly successful rights-based approach. The organisation is widely recognised as one of the leading rights-based INGOs, as evidenced by its frequent appearance in academic literature on RBA. This has allowed ActionAid to set the parameters of the education- and development-rights discourse and to distinguish itself in what has become a crowded field. I would argue that it is precisely because ActionAid was able to define rights-based education work in a way that drew on global norms and reflected global dynamics, while still allowing implementation to proceed at local and national levels, that the organisation was able to produce such a successful strategic frame.

However, it is important to consider the means by which organisational change happens. There are significant power dynamics at play when NGO leadership decides to chart a new path, even when, as is the case with RBA, this is widely seen as a progressive and desirable transition.

RBA is championed as a bottom-up and participatory development model, and certainly there is potential for more equitable social policy through the application of rights-based frameworks. But we must remain aware of the fact that the RBA agenda is predominantly driven by northern-based NGOs and that this entails a certain power imbalance between headquarters and grassroots networks. Future research needs to pay more attention to how the rights-based agenda could in fact reproduce rather than resist global structures of inequality.

Notes

1. Gready. "Organisational Theories of Change".
2. See Cornwall and Nyamu-Musembi, "Putting RBA into Perspective"; Gready, "Rights-based Approaches to Development"; Harris-Curtis et al, "Implications for Northern NGOs"; Hickey and Mitlin, *Rights-Based Approaches to Development*; Nelson and Dorsey, *The Rights Advocacy*; and Uvin, "On Moral High Ground".
3. Sayed and Newman, *Education Review*.
4. Gready. "Organisational Theories of Change", 1356.
5. See Benford and Snow, "Framing Processes and Social Movements"; Keck and Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders*; McAdam et al, *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements*; Oleson, *Power and Transnational Activism*.
6. Benford and Snow, "Framing Processes and Social Movements"
7. Ibid.; Verger and Novelli, *Campaigning for Education for All*, 14.
8. Keck and Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders*, 183
9. Ibid.
10. Finnemore and Sikkink, "International Norm Dynamics"; Khagram, Riker and Sikkink, *Restructuring World Politics*.
11. March and Olsen, "Institutional Dynamics", 249.
12. Finnemore and Sikkink, "International Norm Dynamics", 902.
13. McCarthy, "Social Movement Theory", 246.
14. Oleson, *Power and Transnational Activism*, 10.
15. Snow et al, "Frame Alignment Processes", 464.
16. Ibid., 473.
17. ActionAid, *Global Education Review*, 12.
18. ActionAid, *Report of Education Review Workshop*.
19. Ibid., 8.
20. Ibid., 7-8.
21. Programme Manager, Malawi. Quoted in ActionAid, *Global Education Review*, 30.
22. Consultant, Nepal. Quoted in ActionAid, *Global Education Review*, 30.
23. Programme Coordinator, Burundi. Quoted in ActionAid, *Global Education Review*, 31.
24. ActionAid, *Global Education Review*, 30.
25. Ibid., 79.
26. Ibid., 35.
27. Ibid., 28.
28. Ibid., 10.

29. Ibid. Emphasis added.
30. Ibid., 29.
31. Ibid., 68.
32. Ibid., 9.
33. ActionAid, *Education Strategic Plan*, 3-4.
34. Ibid., 3-5.
35. Ibid., 5.
36. ActionAid, *Education Rights*, 18.
37. Ibid., 43-53.
38. Ibid., 9.
39. Ibid., 7.
40. Ibid., 11.
41. Ibid., 36.
42. Newman, *Integrating Human-Rights Based Approaches*, 185.
43. ActionAid, *Education Rights*, 56.
44. ActionAid, *Education Strategic Plan*, 2).
45. Sayed and Newman, *Education Review*, 1.
46. Ibid., 42.
47. Ibid., 35-38.
48. Education lead from Pakistan, quoted in Sayed and Newman, *Education Review*, 35.
49. Education lead from Nepal, quoted in Sayed and Newman, *Education Review*, 35.
50. Sayed and Newman, *Education Review*, 36.
51. Ibid., 39-42.
52. Staff member from Somaliland, quoted Sayed and Newman, *Education Review*, 39.
53. Staff member from Zambia, quoted Sayed and Newman, *Education Review*, 40.
54. ActionAid Ghana Trustee, quoted Sayed and Newman, *Education Review*, 40.
55. ActionAid, *Education Review - Management Response*, 4.
56. Ibid., 10.
57. Ibid., 4.

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