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Universal Enforcement or Local Empowerment?

A Minor Field Study of International Aid Workers in Rwanda with a Human Rights Based Approach to Development

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Master's thesis, SOC 446, 41-80, spring 2006
Supervisor: Göran Dahl

Abstract

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The rights-based approach (RBA) to development is a response to the perception that development aid has largely failed to overcome discriminatory structures and to help the poorest. The RBA aims to empower the powerless and focuses more on the processes in society than on delivering services. In reality however, these intentions are implemented very differently. This thesis analyses how rights-based practitioners working in international NGOs (Non-Governmental Organisations) in Rwanda talk and act to give poor people more power. The primary material consists of interviews and observations with rights-based practitioners in Rwanda. The thesis describes how the international aid system makes it difficult for international and local NGOs to be accountable and for the beneficiaries to be empowered. Furthermore, the thesis argues that the political environment in Rwanda is hostile towards human rights promoters. Rights-based practitioners are found not to deal primarily with these difficult issues but rather to focus on changing local NGOs, colleagues, and powerless people so that they will obtain a better understanding of human rights. The term 'abstractionism' is developed by the author to describe a process where an abstract understanding of universal human rights and the RBA is rewarded by rights-based practitioners whereas practical experiences and everyday rights struggles are diminished.

Key words: rights-based approach (RBA) to development, international NGOs (Non-Governmental Organisations), human rights, 'abstractionism', Rwanda.

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Maps over Rwanda

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1 Introduction

1.1. The Call for a New Approach to Development

The 1994 Rwandan genocide took the lives of over 800.000 people in the course of three months. The years leading up to the genocide, Rwanda suffered from civil war, ethnic killings, growing antagonism, and political instability and was close to economic collapse[1]. Yet, development actors in Rwanda in the beginning of the 1990s regarded the country to be a model of development in Africa. The indicators they used supported this view: Rwanda had high vaccination rates, a growth in the number of NGOs (Non-Governmental Organisations), and improved infrastructure[2]. Social and political matters, on the other hand, were not in the forefront in the development actors' reports; development aid was seen as technical and non-political[3]. In 1998, four years after the genocide, Peter Uvin published the book *Aiding violence* where he argued that development aid had been intertwined with the political and social structures of power, violence, and exclusion that led to the Rwandan genocide. Development aid had helped the state and the elite, supported their ideology of ethnic discrimination, and extended the reach of their message[4]. *Aiding Violence* spread to a wide audience inside and outside Rwanda. The book came at a time when many development practitioners[5] were questioning the role of development aid[6]. Development agencies in the West felt that their purely technical and non-political approach to development, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, had not resolved issues of poverty, violence, or exclusion, nor led to sustainable development[7]. Many development actors and researchers started to argue that the division between politics and internal dynamics on the one hand, and aid on the other, was flawed[8]. Aid cannot be separated from politics[9]: development aid organisations affect how the economic pie is sliced, 'the balance of powers among competing actors, and the rules of the game by which they compete'[10]. The result of this discussion has become a growing integration of two traditionally well-separated fields, 'human rights' and 'development'.

[1] See for example Melvern 2003: 53, Uvin 1998: 1-2.
[2] Uvin 2004: 2, Uvin 1998: 1-2. See also Storey 2001.
[3] Uvin 1998: 94, 225.
[4] Uvin 1998: 226.
[5] 'Development practitioners' refers to those working in development aid organisations.
[6] Uvin 2004: 2.
[7] See for example Jonsson 2003: 3.
[8] See Duffield 2001: for instance 318, Duffield 2002.
[9] See, on the politics of aid in general, for example Howard 1993: 116, Uvin 1998, 2001, van Ufford 1993.
[10] Boyce 2000: 367.

Human rights and especially the rights-based approach (RBA) to development is the proposed way forward to become aware of the role of politics in development[11].

1.2 Questions and Outline

Trying seriously to integrate human rights into development constitutes a dramatic change from the traditional technical, non-political way of doing aid. Instead of mainly delivering services, RBA seeks to change power relations to give poor people more of a say in the processes that involve them. This thesis focuses on aid workers, here referred to as rights-based practitioners, from six international rights-based NGOs[12] in Rwanda. It seeks to respond to the question: *How do rights-based practitioners talk and act to give poor people more power?* The rights-based practitioners will be analysed in the context of their own organisations. Parallel to this question, the thesis will discuss *why* the rights-based practitioners talk and act in the way they do. The response to these questions is structured around three themes. First, Chapter 4 will describe the Rwandan government's response to RBA and discuss how it affects the rights-based practitioner's accounts and way of working. Second, the mechanisms of the aid system, as well as the rights-based rationale, have implications for rights-based practitioners and their attempts to be more 'accountable downwards' – to listen, adjust and give more power to local actors. This will be discussed in chapter 5. The third theme will address more specifically the underlying ideas of human rights and RBA. It will be argued in chapter 6 that rights-based practitioners engage in a process of 'abstractionism' (a term developed for this thesis) which rewards an abstract understanding of human rights and RBA while diminishing practical experiences. Chapter 7 will discuss how the three themes interrelate and draw the main conclusions. Before the material is presented it is, however, necessary to discuss the methodology in chapter 2 and the theoretical framework in chapter 3.

1.3 Relevance

In the world of development aid, practice is often lagging behind theory[13]; this means that an NGO first adopts a new approach, in this case a RBA, in for example policies, strategy documents and trainings, and then struggles to implement this approach in their everyday

[11] VeneKlasen et al 2004: 3. See also Jonsson 2003: 3.
[12] I will sometimes, for practical reasons, write only 'rights-based NGOs' when I mean 'rights-based international NGOs'. I have not found any local NGOs in Rwanda with a rights-based approach.
[13] Some who implicitly or explicitly expect this to be the normal case are Nyamu-Musembi and Cornwall 2004, VeneKlasen et al 2004, Jonsson 2003, and Eyben 2003.

work. All of the international NGOs in this study have officially adopted a RBA and are now working to change their practice. Development practitioners, who until recently did not think about politics and human rights as part of their domain, now have to find ways to deal with these issues. This thesis presents a rare field study of how development practitioners and NGOs deal with dramatic policy changes in their organisations as they change to a RBA[14]. The thesis takes part of an ongoing discussion, which RBA is part of, on how to give poor people more power over their lives. It will also describe relevant human rights debates and discuss how they relate to rights-based practitioners way to talk, act and understand their work. Additionally, chapter 3 will give a theoretical discussion on the pros and cons of applying postcolonial theory to studies on development aid. This discussion is highly relevant since postcolonial theory is sometimes used fallaciously, without a self-critical discussion.

1.4. The Rights-Based Approach to Development – Why Now?

The integration of human rights and development has been made possible by a wide range of factors. The most important is, as was mentioned above, the perception that development aid in its traditional non-political guise has largely failed. The end of the Cold War is also of crucial importance. The victory of liberal democracy was a triumph for political and civil rights (advocated by the United States) over economic, social, and cultural rights (advocated by the Soviet Union)[15], but it also made it possible to bridge earlier divisions and to combine the two sets of rights. States and development actors could agree on 'the right to development' and the necessity of acknowledging the interrelation of different human rights[16]. Another important change during the 1990s was the rethinking of poverty. During most of development aid history, the main poverty indicator has been economic growth[17], but leading actors have helped to change this image. Nobel laureate and economist Amartya Sen for example, argued in his influential book *Development as Freedom*[18] that poverty should be defined as each individual's lack of power over their own life, rather than simply as lack of

[14] According to Peter Uvin very few field studies has been made on the RBA: Author's conversation with Peter Uvin.
[15] Galtung 1992: 161.
[16] The United Nations adopted the declaration on the Right to Development in 1986. The declaration unifies the two sets of rights and states that they all rights are indivisible and interdependent, and are to be enjoyed by all human beings 'without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion' (Sengupta 2000: 555). The declaration was more or less a dead paper until the end of the Cold War. In a set of major conferences in the first half of the 1990s a consensus was built around the right to development and the importance of intergrating human rights into development. Most notable are the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna (1993), and the World Social Development Summit in Copenhagen (1995). See Nyamu-Musembi and Cornwall 2004.
[17] Howard 1993: 115.
[18] Published in 1999, but drawing on earlier thinking and publications from Sen.

money. *The Voices of the Poor* was published in 2000 and 2002 by the World Bank and was another important work that changed the definition of poverty; drawing on meetings with 60 000 poor people around the world, it supports Sen's thesis; poor people talk about their lack of influence and power in the processes and institutions (state, market, etc.) that affects them[19].

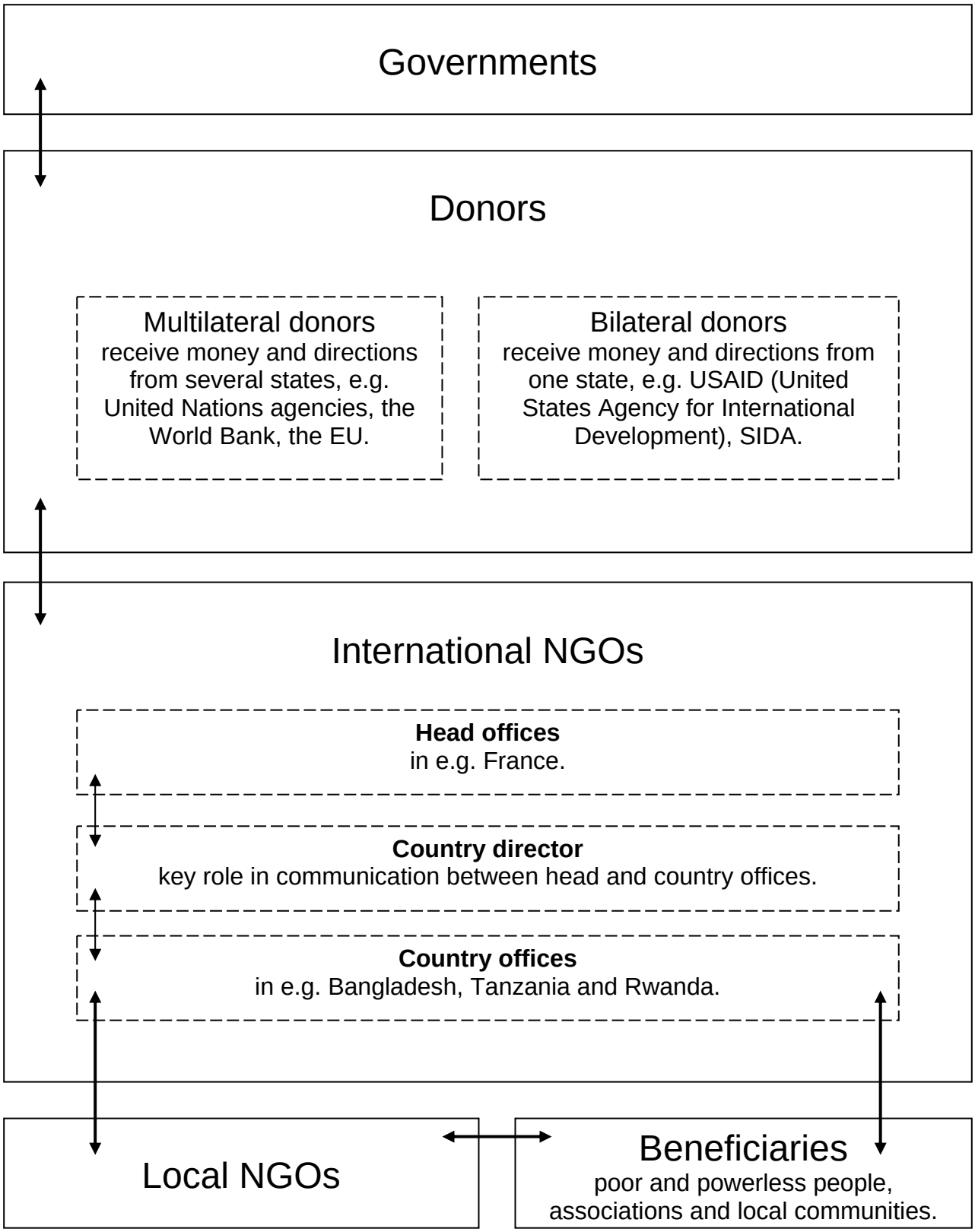
1.5. Introducing some Basic Concepts

An NGO (Non-Governmental Organisation) will for the purpose of this paper be defined by two characteristics. First, what makes an NGO different from any other form of organisation is that it claims to be 'doing good for the development of others'[20]. Second, the NGO has, as the name indicates, no formal ties to any government[21]. Typically you distinguish between local and international NGOs. Local NGOs are based in the developing country[22] itself, in this case Rwanda, and operate only within that country. International NGOs, which this study focuses on, often operates in several developing countries, with head offices usually located in the West. Country offices in the developing countries receive information, directions, money and help with other funding opportunities from the head office, and they also inform and report to the head office. A key role in this communication is held by the country director, who is often headhunted from the head office and is often, at least in the cases included in this study, a foreigner.

Donors usually have more formal ties to governments, such as SIDA (Swedish International Development Agency), which gets its mandate from the Swedish government. Donors have a key role in the aid system and most NGOs owe them their existence[23]. Finally, all these actors engage in many different kinds of aid, such as democratic aid, humanitarian aid, relief aid, and health aid. This paper deals with development aid, the broadest kind of aid. Development aid is supposed to help the overall development and can therefore be about supporting more or less everything, from financing peace organisations to HIV/AIDS treatment, building democratic institutions, or enhancing local people's availability to water, healthcare, food, infrastructure, education.

[19] Karlsson 2003: 7.
[20] Hilhorst: 5
[21] Despite this, NGOs can be highly dependent on governments. For further discussion on what NGOs are, see https://www.who.int/hac/techguidance/tools/disrupted_sectors/policy_process/en/index16.html
[22] I am following the definitions used by many development agencies, which define most countries in Africa as 'developing countries' as opposed to the 'developed countries', mainly to be found in the West.
[23] This will be further discussed in chapter 5.

Table 1: Important Actors in the Development Aid System



* The arrows indicate flows of money, information, directions, reporting etc. between the actors.

1.6. Rights-Based NGOs in Rwanda and the Focus of this Thesis - the Importance of Processes and Training

In rights-based development aid, the focus becomes less on specific kinds of services (food, democratic institutions, health etc.) and more on processes in society. The rights-based NGOs in Rwanda aim to give people who have little power, like women, children and landless persons, more power in the processes that affect them[24]. A rights-based approach can be about land legislation, education or conflict resolution, but the most important aspect is that poor people should define and prioritize the problems themselves. An important way of ensuring participation by the poor is by gathering and discussing with people in a given community or association, in order to find out what kind of problems and rights violations there are in their area. Often, international NGOs do this kind of work through local NGOs who are supposed to implement the activities on the local level. Another important aspect for many rights-based NGOs is to advocate issues on behalf of the poor and make authorities responsible for their actions[25].

Rights-based activities, to different extent in different NGOs, include training[26]. Local NGOs are trained to achieve better managing and organisational skills, and local organisations, local people and local authorities are trained to have a better understanding of human rights and the vision of society that RBA entails. Training is an important component also within most rights-based NGOs and it is at the level of training and language that this paper steps in. Thus the focus will neither be on specific groups (woman, landless etc.), or specific fields of activities (peace, education etc.) nor on specific human rights. Instead, this thesis will account for how the RBA language is negotiated in the international NGO, and also how it works its way to the local NGOs and the people that are to benefit from the activities: the beneficiaries. Furthermore, the thesis will focus on how rights-based NGOs and practitioners work to find space within the international aid system so as to give more power to their beneficiaries to define their problems themselves.

[24] Demands for full participation of disadvantaged groups and calls for local ownership over processes that affect them have been around since the late 1970s. Thus, a RBA builds much on lessons learned from earlier development experiences (see Tsikata: 4).

[25] One current example is the network "Landnet" which works to be the poor people's voice in the massive land processes and redistributions that are now starting to be carried out in Rwanda. Another is UNICEF which is working for Rwandan laws and policies to be in line with the United Nations Convention on Children's Rights.

[26] It is difficult to define the difference between 'training' and 'education', but some argue that training is, or should be, more about changing people's attitudes, more interactive, more experimental and more based on concrete issues. See http://www.unhabitat.org/HD/hddec97/forum.htm.

1.7. Presentation of the Author

The extraordinary tragic events in Rwanda in 1994 caught my interest: How come such a genocide – 800.000 people killed in three months with mostly machetes and clubs – could happen in our time? Calling it a 'tragic' event is perhaps not the best way to describe the 1994 genocide since it may suggest that the 'tragedy' was bound to happen and that nothing could have been done to prevent it. On the contrary, the 1994 genocide was made possible by a range of social and political – local and international – factors. When I initiated and spearheaded a year-long Rwanda project in 2003 my aim was both to learn more about such underlying factors and to inspire other people to gain knowledge about what had happened in Rwanda. Through several lectures and study circles the project focused on the Rwandan genocide and dealt with Rwandan history, the factors leading to the 1994 genocide and how Rwanda and other countries and institutions were dealing with the aftermath. I also organised a study trip that was conducted in June 2004: eleven Swedish and Danish students went to Rwanda to meet politicians, local NGOs, and orphan-headed households, and to visit universities and genocide memorials etc. The project and the trip greatly enhanced my knowledge and interest for Rwanda and I became more interested in the country's current challenges. I wanted specifically to learn more about the involvement of international actors in the development of Rwanda and this made me return to Rwanda in May-July 2005, this time on my own, to conduct this study. During my time in Rwanda I learned that rights-based international NGOs approached some of the most difficult challenges both in Rwanda's development and in the development aid system, so focusing on these organisations gave me an opportunity to consider and analyse these questions. Almost all aid workers I met in Rwanda have been very helpful and accommodating and have taught me much about the situation in Rwanda and their organisations and work. I owe much of this thesis to them.

2 Methodology and Limitations

This chapter will briefly account for the material and how I have been working with interviews and observations, both while doing them as well as afterwards, at the desk. The chapter will end by mentioning some limitations to the study.

2.1. The Material and the Process

The thesis focuses on six rights-based international NGOs in Rwanda[27]. Between May and July 2005, twenty-five interviews have been conducted both with country directors who most often come from outside Rwanda and with local staff (Rwandans), most of which were in key positions in the organisations. Eight observations have also been made on different occasions: trainings within the staff, meetings where rights-based practitioners from different NGOs exchange experiences, and field trips where the international NGO meets with the beneficiaries of its activities. Additionally, eight representatives for local NGOs who are partners to one or more of the rights-based NGOs have been interviewed about those partnerships, and their perception of RBA[28]. I have chosen a strategy where the material – mainly interviews and observations – has been important for deciding what this thesis will be about. My way of interpreting the material as well as gathering it, of creating this thesis, has been of paramount importance for the study's findings. For example, in the interview situation the answers will differ depending on the interviewer's appearance (age, skin colour, behaviour, clothes etc.) and ability to create trust with the interviewer. Later, at the desk, when the researcher is to do something with the interviews, their assumptions (based on theories, world view, personal connection to the interviewees etc.) will affect what they highlight or down-play and what conclusions they draw. Additionally, the whole process of writing, from the interviews and observations to the final paper, is a construction; it cannot be regarded as a neutral mirroring of realities[29]. Even if the bias is impossible to eliminate, every researcher should try, I think, to be as honest as possible. This can be done by for example

[27] Two of these could perhaps be considered donors rather than NGOs. Both the organisations however fit well in most of the discussions and major themes of the thesis, which is why they have been included.
[28] I also made more than 25 interviews that were not specifically about RBA with people from international and local NGOs, and donors, as well as with journalists and researchers. They can give insights in for example how the local NGOs function and are perceived, but they will be used very seldom in this paper. Their main benefit has been to give me a picture of the main mechanisms in the aid system and the Rwandan context. The same goes for primary written sources, which has helped me in my understanding and interpretations but will be used modestly.
[29] See Emerson et al 1995: for instance 66-67.

challenging their assumptions or interpretations, and to let other people challenge them. The approach of this thesis differs from an approach where the theory comes first and the material comes later. Rather, it has been an interaction between assumptions, theories, literature, and the material. This means for example that I have learned much from my interviewees which have made me redraw many of my initial assumptions, but also that I have reinterpreted some interviews after reading literature and documents on for example the political situation in Rwanda. Almost all the interviews and observations have been transcribed[30] and the material has been read several times in order to find appropriate ways to systematize it. This has resulted in the creation of the three themes that structure this thesis[31].

The interviews

I constructed an interview guide in Rwanda which was used as a base[32]. My aim was to listen as much as possible and try to have an open conversation based on what I and the interviewee thought was important, rather than strictly following the guide. If the interview went well, I looked at the interview guide at the end of the interview and found that most questions had already been touched on. Even though I am still much in power of the framework in which the interview is conducted (it is still a situation where I ask questions and the interviewee answers rather than a mutual conversation), this approach has the benefit of giving the interviewee some space to express themselves on their own terms. By focusing on what is important for the interviewees chances are increased that the theories and conclusions growing out of this thesis will be relevant to the setting and actors involved in the study[33]. Since the interviews came to focus on different issues and use different language, they cannot be quantified or compared in any simple way. My way of working has been to go through the material afterwards in an effort to find common themes and different statements and arguments that can support one another.

The observations

The observations have been essential to this thesis. Taking part in the interactions between RBA practitioners themselves, and between them and beneficiaries, usually revealed much more than a normal interview; they talked about other things in other ways than in the

[30] I have transcribed from my notebooks to the computer. None of my interviews in Rwanda were tape-recorded.
[31] Although this is not an ethnographic study, my way of working with the material has been inspired by Emerson et al 1995 and their handbook for ethnographical studies.
[32] For more information on the interview guides, see appendix 1.
[33] See Emerson et al 1995: 166-168.

interviews where I was setting the context. Most of my observations took place within the context of large groups of people where I tried to intervene as little as possible. Therefore I believe that in most observations, the affect of my presence to what was said or done was minimal[34].

2.2 Limitations

Language
For many of the interviewees in this study English is their third language after French and Kinyarwanda. Interviews have been conducted in English, and during most of my observations the language used was English. It worked well, but if a language that was more comfortable for both parts would have been used, I might very well have understood certain aspects differently.

About making the interviewees anonymous
As will be described in chapter 4, the situation is difficult for many actors in Rwanda who want to speak about human rights in one way or another. Rights-based NGOs have been verbally attacked by Rwandan authorities and these attacks have caused some rights-based practitioners to fear repercussions and some have adjusted their way of working. For this reason, I have worked hard to make all organisations and persons involved in this study anonymous. While many interviewees found this important, others said it was unnecessary. Nevertheless, in order to satisfy those that find it important, I have made everything anonymous. I have also changed some events and situations, and sometimes mixed observations together, so that trying to find out who has said what would not be worthwhile. Nonetheless, I believe I have not changed or manipulated those facts that are of importance for my interpretations and conclusions.

[34] Emerson et al (1995: 140) argue that the primary tool for getting at members' meanings is, rather than conducting interviews, to observe naturally occurring talk and interaction.

3 Theoretical Framework

This thesis strives to critically assess the good intentions of rights-based practitioners and NGOs. Postcolonial theory can help to do so since it questions concepts such as 'development', 'human rights' and 'progress' and suggests another way of understanding history and contemporary society. Michel Foucault's understanding of power, knowledge, truth and discourse has influenced postcolonial theory. Both Foucault and postcolonial theory, however, tend to focus on structures and rest on some questionable assumptions. After discussing these problems as well as the contribution of postcolonial theory and foucauldian thought to this thesis, the final section of the chapter will pinpoint the approach of this thesis, which is referred to as analysing the 'accounter' *through* structures and discourses.

3.1 Introducing Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonialism is a way to re-interpret history, to criticize the history of modernisation itself; 'colonisation references something more than direct rule over certain areas of the world by the imperial powers'. It rather signifies 'the whole process of expansion, conquest, colonisation and imperial hegemonisation which constituted the "outer face", the constitutive outside, of European and then Western capitalist modernity after 1492'[35]. For the purpose of this thesis postcolonial theory can be divided into two major fields. First, there is a wide discussion on how the ex-colonised, or sometimes more generally, those with little power in society, should create their own identity without speaking the language of the oppressor[36]. This will not be discussed further in this thesis since I focus on those working in international NGOs rather than people with little power in society. Second, postcolonial theorists criticize the West's understanding of concepts like 'development', 'progress', and 'modernisation'. They believe that these concepts and the actions done in their name – such as 'human rights for everyone' – is often an act of power since it diminishes other ways than the dominant of looking at for example 'progress'. To criticize these concepts then can give more space to people's own definitions and prioritizations[37].

[35] Hall 1996a: 249-253. See also Eriksson et al 1999: especially 16 and 29. Exactly what colonisation is, or who should be considered postcolonial, are disputed and often unanswered questions among postcolonial theorists. For a discussion on this, see Hall 1999: especially 84ff.
[36] See for example Eriksson et al 1999: 33-48.
[37] See Hobart 1993: 14, Darby 2004: 3.

3.2. Michel Foucault

Foucault's work has been very important for much of postcolonial theory[38]. Foucault is interested in power relations in order to understand why certain things are regarded as true and others as false. He argues that it is a misconception that knowledge exists only outside power relations.

> We should admit rather that power produces knowledge … that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations[39].

The will to knowledge, to find the truth, Foucault argues, is closely intertwined with power. 'Truth' is perceived by us as soft, universal, benevolent power, and it therefore disables us from seeing the very machinery of normalisation and exclusion that runs beneath the will to truth and knowledge[40]. 'Truth' is in fact power at work, working to mask itself behind what is so unquestionable that we often do not even see it. The 'regime of truth', as Foucault calls it, privileges certain kinds of discourse before others. Discourse, in its turn, is the mechanism of exclusion and inclusion; it decides what can and cannot be said about a certain matter[41].

Many have struggled to understand what Foucault means with power. Foucault is detailed in his analysis of how power works but it is more difficult to find out exactly *what* power is. Jürgen Habermas, one of Foucault's strongest critics, argues that Foucault lumps together the will to knowledge with power. There is no room in Foucault's world for a subject that seeks knowledge without wanting power, he says[42]. The will to power/knowledge is supposed to be inherent in all discourses for *all* times and *all* societies[43]. Foucault illustrates this point with empirical data but according to Habermas and others he does not give enough evidence for his universal theory[44]. Foucault himself laughs when he hears that people think he equals power with knowledge, 'since studying their *relation* is exactly my problem'[45]. But since Foucault never pinpoints what power is, and constantly stresses that the 'production of knowledge accompanies in principle the exercise of social domination over other subjects'[46] it is

[38] Eriksson et al 1999: 19, Persson 2006: 7.
[39] Foucault (1978) quoted in Kelly 1994: 378-9. See also Foucault 2003: 188-195, and 1988: especially 103-104.
[40] Foucault 1993: 15. See also Foucault 1988: especially 103-104.
[41] Foucault 1993: 10.
[42] Habermas 1994: 82.
[43] Habermas 1994: 83.
[44] Habermas 1994, Honneth 1994.
[45] Foucault 1994: 133.
[46] Honneth 1994: 158. Foucault seems to distinguish power, which is not evil, from domination, which is to be avoided and/or resisted. See McCarthy 1994: especially 264.

understandable that some perceive Foucault's descriptions of the will to knowledge and the will to power as being more or less the same thing.

Even though Foucault's theory of power can be described as being all too much 'like the night in which all cows are black'[47] his basic insights of a 'political economy of truth' is helpful for this study. Power, working trough any '"regime of truth" involves privileging certain types of discourse, sanctioning certain ways of distinguishing true from false statements, underwriting certain techniques for arriving at the truth, according a certain status to those who competently employ them, and so forth'[48]. In other words, a growing knowledge may be accompanied with a growing ignorance[49]. This approach will help us to better understand chapter 6 where I will discuss how practical experiences often become diminished or ignored while other types of human rights and RBA knowledge are rewarded.

3.3. Postcolonial Theory as a 'Regime of Truth'

It is very interesting to apply the foucauldian perspective on postcolonial theory itself. What 'regime of truth' is operating within the postcolonial field of knowledge? Both Foucault and postcolonial theory in general are heavily criticized for not being self-critical in the way they ask other disciplines to be[50]. Furthermore, postcolonial theory is criticized for not dealing with reality; that it does not start with people's experiences but with questions of representations and discourses. A postcolonial study conducted by Maria Eriksson Baaz (2002) about Scandinavian aid workers in Tanzania illustrates these issues well, and will be used here to discuss the problems with postcolonial and foucauldian theory. In her study, she shows how the Scandinavian workers construct themselves as active, superior and reliable, as opposed to the passive, backward, unreliable, inferior African partner. These representations are traced back to colonial constructions of 'the African'. Eriksson Baaz argues that this can help the Scandinavian aid workers to organize their environment as well as legitimize their own work[51]. But she fails to account for at least three things. First, she does not discuss in depth what the reasons or incentives in the Scandinavian aid workers' everyday work are that cause them to interpret their African partners in this specific way. If this question would have

[47] McCarthy 1994: 254.
[48] McCarthy 1994: 253.
[49] See Hobart 1993: especially 20-22.
[50] Habermas 1994 and Honneth 1994 criticize Foucault. Wolin 2004: for example p. 42, criticizes all 'post'-theories including Foucault. San Juan 1998, 2003, and Darby 2004: for example 2, criticizes postcolonial theory/theorists.
[51] Eriksson Baaz 2002: for example 214ff.

been taken into greater consideration Eriksson Baaz might very well have reached other results. What I wish to question is the importance of looking at contemporary aid from a perspective of colonial legacies[52].

Second, Eriksson Baaz's study makes the legitimization of 'the Self' into an all-encompassing explanation. When the Scandinavian aid workers engage in self-criticism by asking for example 'What right do we have to be here?' or 'Do we have anything at all to contribute?'[53] Eriksson Baaz argues that it 'must be seen as a (rather natural) reflection of a need to reinstate legitimacy'[54]. This is a cynical approach where Eriksson Baaz diminishes all practical experiences that the aid workers might have learned from. Here we see how the foucauldian theory of power can be criticized for diminishing actors' practical experiences and statements and regarding them all as being about reinstating legitimacy and power. Eriksson Baaz shows that Habermas has a point when he states that individuals in Foucault's perspective become no more than 'exemplars, as standardized products of some discourse formation – as individual copies that are mechanically punched out'[55]. Perhaps the Scandinavian aid workers that Eriksson Baaz meets have worked in Tanzania for fifteen years and feel that they are not doing much good, maybe they have read some of the massive critique about the structural problems of the aid business, of which Eriksson Baaz's study is an example, and have actually reflected about it. Eriksson Baaz leaves no room for this kind of explanations; instead it is all about reinstating their own legitimacy and (self-critical) superiority.

Third, Eriksson Baaz interviews only white aid workers working in Africa. This makes her case easy; white aid workers (the Self) working with black African partners (the Other), but the reality is that the personnel in most international NGOs in Africa consist of a vast majority of Africans. In Rwanda, for example, the government pushes for it to be a maximum of two foreigners in every international NGO; how would Eriksson Baaz's study look if she instead studied such an organisation? This is an example of that the distinction between Whites and Blacks is perhaps not the most fruitful approach; the World has changed since colonisation reigned.

[52] Another postcolonial theorist, Phillip Darby (2004:2), says that it is time to 'confront the politics of our own criticism. How far are colonial legacies and anticolonial strategies relevant today?'
[53] Eriksson Baaz 2002: 189.
[54] Eriksson Baaz 2002: 204.
[55] Habermas 1994: 104.

Asking what 'regime of truth' may be operating in postcolonial theory by looking at Eriksson Baaz's study reveals some crucial assumptions, or, as one might also call them, unanswered questions. Central to postcolonial theory is the critique of binary oppositions prevalent in Western thought[56]. To illustrate, one is either man or woman; one is a man only because of what one is not – a woman. It is the same with the modern Western project which, as we saw above, is seen as constituted, based, in a crucial distinction between the civilized Europeans and 'the Others' – those who are not part of the civilisation project. These binary constructions, postcolonialists argue, have helped the 'civilized White man' to retain the power position in the World. This alleged importance of focusing on and criticizing the binaries of 'the West' and 'the rest' rests on unanswered questions such as: *To what extent* is the construction of 'the Other' important to the Western Self's liberation? What are the links between the construction of 'the African' and the same African's conditions and experiences in a given community? In the end, then, if these questions are not carefully addressed, the postcolonial intention to question binary oppositions might instead reinforce them. When Eriksson Baaz assumes that the African Other is of crucial importance to the Scandinavian aid workers' Western Self she is not only questioning that line of thought but also reinforcing it, forcing us to look at the World through the binary opposites of 'the West' vs. 'the rest' or 'the African'.

3.4. The Contribution of Postcolonial Theory to this Study

Responding to the critique that they don't really deal with reality, postcolonialists argue that discourse as they understand it is about the production of meaning and therefore is as much about reality as anything else, or in fact more, since they can add the theoretical insightfulness of how power produces knowledge and truth[57]. They emphasize that we have to focus on discourse: on how subjects are 'spoken'; what language people use and why?[58] How do development practitioners, for example, understand their environment? How are they influenced by discourses on for example 'human rights' and 'development'? These are important questions for this thesis and I will discuss some influencing human rights/RBA discourses in chapter 6.

[56] Binary oppositions, their hierarchical relation, and the meaning that they produce are much based on the thoughts of Jacques Derrida, and before that, Ferdinand Saussure, and are also used by post-structuralists. See Eriksson et al 1999: 18.
[57] Eriksson Baaz 2002: 30.
[58] See Hall, 1996b: 5-6, and Eriksson Baaz 2002: 33

Eriksson Baaz's study can be used to illustrate that the analysis of discourse may take attention away from lived experiences, from reality, in a number of ways. To interpret my interviews in terms of 'Self' and 'Other' I believe would be insufficient, because reality itself is more complex. For example, a common statement that I heard from international NGO practitioners in Rwanda goes something like: "There are hardly any local NGOs in this country that work for the poor; they only work to enrich themselves and their friends". How am I to interpret this statement? As something not based on reality, something which they say only to represent their 'Self' as honest and working for the poor, as opposed to 'the Other' that is dishonest and clientelistic? And what difference does it make if the international NGO practitioner's skin is white or black? I want instead to use an approach which focuses on how international aid workers perceive and describe their reality, and work more from their own definitions and ways of talking. Still, binary oppositions will be used to better understand the rights-based practitioners' accounts. It is a useful methodological tool to understand how they define themselves as opposed to the Africans 'that need to develop'[59] or the local NGOs 'that need to change'. Compared to studies such as Eriksson Baaz's, I aim to let the binary categories rise from the material rather than deciding the categories on beforehand. This will be done specifically when talking about the right-based rationale in chapter 5.

3.5. Analysing the 'Accounter' *through* Structures and Discourses

Dorothea Hilhorst, who has written about NGOs, discourses, and development, proposes a helpful solution to overcome Foucault's and postcolonialism's structural approach. She argues that it is important to account for everyday practices in NGOs as something more than the result of dominant discourses. It is important to recognize that discourses, structures and constraints work through people, and that these actors also shape structures[60]. This mutual actor/structure approach can lead to a deeper understanding of the motivations of NGO actors, and how they understand and define their surroundings. Following Hilhorst I will account for the reality mainly through the eyes of the rights-based practitioner. The point is not to study their 'Self' or personalities but to discuss how some of the material conditions and barriers, and discourses that they are working through relate to their accounts and the implementation of RBA. The most obvious environment that the rights-based practitioner works through is of course their organisation, and this interrelation will be present throughout the thesis. Other

[59] I use this term to point out that the NGOs often define who 'those that are to develop' are as well as how they should develop. If I had instead written for example 'communities in need' it could instead suggest that their needs and solutions are defined by themselves or given by nature.
[60] Hilhorst: especially 2. See also Mohanty 1999.

discourses and structures will however be more specifically addressed; How may, for example, the hostility of the Rwandan government, or the vision of the rights-based approach, affect and interrelate with the rights-based practitioners' accounts?

As was pointed out earlier, what distinguishes an NGO from other organisations is that it claims to 'do good for the development of others'. This claim is also what makes it possible for the NGO to 'make a bid to access funding and public representation'[61]. Every NGO depends on money from other actors. In order to access this money the NGO describes a problem and then proposes solutions which the NGO aims to carry out. In other words, 'doing good for the development of others' presupposes that the NGO has something which the people 'that are to develop' lack. Proposing problems and solutions are in the end representations of local realities. Even if representations or accounts can not be argued to be totally imbued with power it can be said that 'given the complexity and muddiness of local realities, the accounts of such processes are inevitably partial, and but one interpretation among many possible narratives'[62]. It is therefore important to 'bring more explicitly into the analysis the "accounter" i.e. the person or organization composing and presenting the accounts'[63]. The 'accounter' here is the RBA practitioner, and questions that this thesis will discuss are: How do they struggle with implementing the approach? What is the relation between representations of local realities and the RBA discourse within the NGO?

To sum up: this thesis regards human rights and the rights-based approach as fields of knowledge. This is a helpful approach to understand how power works through discourse to define what is regarded as knowledge, what is highlighted and what is diminished, in short, what is or is not part of the 'regime of truth'. However, it is argued here that discourses do not only shape actors, rather they work *through* actors, and actors also shape discourses and structures. To highlight this, I will focus on the 'accounter' – the rights-based practitioner – and base my categorizations and presentation of this study on their 'accounts' rather than predetermined categories.

[61] Hilhorst: 5.
[62] Hilhorst: 10, see also Hobart 1993: 13.
[63] Hilhorst: 12, see also Hobart 1993: especially 14.

4 RBA and the Political Environment in Rwanda

In order to have a discussion on what happens when the rights-based approach is to be implemented, it is necessary to first look closer at some constraints that may affect the RBA practitioner. This chapter sets out to do so by focusing on the political environment for human rights promoters in Rwanda. Rights-based development NGOs and human rights NGOs seem to be perceived by the Rwandan government as a real threat, and the government in its turn is perceived as a real threat by many of the rights-based NGOs. The first section of this chapter will account for some of the most important events in this respect in Rwanda since 2002. The following section will briefly describe how rights-based practitioners perceive the political environment in Rwanda and what strategies they have chosen to overcome these difficulties.

4.1. Human Rights in Rwanda since 2002 – a Story of 'Divisionism' and 'Genocidal Ideology'

In 2002 a law which has become known as the law on 'divisionism' was adopted in Rwanda. Put simply, it forbids anyone to 'make use of any speech, written statement or action that causes conflict [or] an uprising that may degenerate into strife among people'[64]. In the 2003 Rwandan constitution two articles give further legal base to the crimes of 'divisionism'[65]. The language in the constitution and in the law of 2002 was very general and it was unclear how they would be enforced. However, during the last years they have been frequently used and the government has labelled opposition politicians and others as 'divisionists'; the laws were for example used by the government to ban the largest opposition party just before the parliamentary elections in 2003. Also, several individuals that have been labelled 'divisionists' have fled the country, others have disappeared[66].

[64] Front Line 2005: 12.
[65] Article 13, 33. The constitution can be found on http://www.rwandaparliament.gov.rw/constitution_eng.pdf.
[66] Front Line 2005, EIU Country Profile 2005, Lemarchand 2004. For similar events before 2002, see Willum 2001.

Rights-based international NGOs pointed out as spreading 'genocidal ideology'

In July 2004 a parliamentary report was released. It accused local human rights organisations and international rights-based NGOs for spreading a 'genocidal ideology'[67]. As with being charged with 'divisionism', these are very strong accusations in a country that recently experienced genocide. The report accused the international community of 'sowing division within the Rwandan population' and charged four international NGOs in particular for helping Rwandan organisations create a genocidal ideology[68]. Why these four international NGOs are pointed out in particular is not made clear in the report. One reason may have been that three of them supported LIPRODHOR, one of Rwanda's strongest and most well-known human rights NGOs as well as the most targeted organisation in the 2004 report[69]. LIPRODHOR was also accused of 'divisionism' by many influential local NGOs in Rwanda at a meeting in May 2003, and it has been targeted by the government since 2002[70]. But what the accused international NGOs all have in common is that they have, or are perceived as having, a rights-based approach, an approach that is less technical and more about politics and power[71]. Staff members in some of the accused organisations that I interviewed feel that the accusations are ungrounded and believe that the reason they were pointed out in the report is their RBA.

Why are rights-based organisations perceived as a threat?

"Come here, I want to show you something". She takes me to another room and shows me a quote by Amartya Sen. It says that a famine has never occurred in a functioning democracy with a relatively free press. I get the point; *real* democracy is a must if Rwanda wants to overcome the legacy of poverty, violence, and injustice. A free press and freedom of speech being some of the most important aspects.

These notes are from an interview with a rights-based practitioner in Rwanda. How can these kinds of views – that could have been stated by many RBA practitioners – be perceived by Rwandan politicians as such a big threat? Two important answers may be analytically crystallized. The first is that the government does sense a real threat for the 'genocidal ideology' to take root, that any encouragement of free speech or any creation of a public sphere in which the population could form groups and make claims on the state, might make

[67] Exactly what having a 'genocidal ideology' or spreading 'divisionism' means depends on who you ask, but it clearly refers to the environment in Rwanda before and during 1994 when it can be claimed that an 'ideology' spread among the Hutus that was about exterminating another group, the Tutsis. (Willum 2001: 81).
[68] Front Line 2005: 84. See also EIU Country Profile 2005: 9, Lemarchand 2004: 4.
[69] Front Line 2005: 45ff. LIPRODHOR was mentioned 29 times in the report. According to for example Amnesty International (quoted in Lemarchand 2004: 4) the accusations in the report are baseless and are only used to silence those in disagreement with the government.
[70] Front Line 2005: 45-46.
[71] Front Line 2005: especially 84-85.

the majority population, the Hutus, rise against the Tutsis again[72]. And after all, there are still extremist Hutu militias in the forests of the Democratic Republic of Congo who may pose a threat to Rwanda's security[73]. The second answer is that the politicians in power are not interested in too much democracy; they simply do not want to loose power. They make changes – such as building up democratic institutions – in order to keep aid money coming, but they are not interested in having their power questioned[74]. Both answers, or any combination of them, make it understandable why many Rwandan politicians do not appreciate the rights-based approach.

The space for freedom of speech and independent actors in Rwanda

More than three months after the parliamentary report was released in July 2004, the EU, that was also funding the local human rights organisation LIPRODHOR, responded. In an official statement the EU uttered concerns about the fact that the report had publicly accused persons and organisations without due investigation or without letting these people respond to the accusations. The EU also stated that it was troubled by the liberal use of terms such as 'divisionism' and 'genocidal ideology' and asked for clearer definitions of those terms as well as explanations about their relation to discrimination, sectarianism, and freedom of speech in general. The Rwandan government, in turn, made a response that was widely publicized through the state media.

> The Government of Rwanda wishes to remind that in 1994 some governments in the western world were begged to use their technological advances to silence the infamous Radio Télévision des Mille Collines (RTLM) which was calling for the extermination of Tutsis. The unequivocal answer was that silencing this terrible radio would be an infringement to the freedom of expression and/or press of those who were using RTLM. Rwanda cannot subscribe to this liberal interpretation of the freedom of expression and freedom of the press[75].

This is a clear example of how the Government of Rwanda is using past mistakes of the international community as well as the 1994 genocide to justify limitations to freedom of speech. As the Front Line[76] report says, 'The Rwandan Government's response to the EU declaration does not leave room for much hope that it will grant more space to independent

[72] It was a Ugandan Tutsi-dominated army that stopped the genocide and won the war in 1994, and it is a Ugandan Tutsi-dominated government which is now ruling the country (EIU Country Profile 2005: 13, Front Line 2005).
[73] This threat is by many observers seen as 'wildly exaggerated' (for example Lemarchand 2004: 3). For a full understanding one should acknowledge Rwanda's other interests in Congo, such as natural resources. See UNSC 2002, Fairhead 2005, Reyntjens, 2005, Cuvelier and Marysse 2003, International Crisis Group 2004.
[74] This is the case in most countries in sub-Saharan Africa. See for example Chabal and Daloz 1999.
[75] Front Line 2005: 100-101. See also Lemarchand 2004: 4.
[76] Front Line is an international foundation that works 'to defend human rights defenders' (http://www.frontlinedefenders.org).

civil society and media'[77]. Or, as Peter Uvin wrote in the middle of the democratic elections process in Rwanda in 2003:

> As predicted, what Rwanda is currently going through is not a process of democratization as much as a formal election painted on top of an increasingly totalitarian state. The closing off of all political space, the maintenance of a climate of fear, the intimidations and disappearances of potentially critical voices, the banning of the sole opposition party with some possible popular grounding, the attacks on key civil society organizations and the further muzzling of the press – all point to the undeniable fact that there is, in 2003, no free choice in Rwanda[78].

This space, that some claim is non-existent, is what many international actors, and especially RBA actors, want to see more of in Rwanda.

The weak response from international actors and their lack of support for local NGOs

International donors and NGOs have since the genocide promoted human rights education and monitoring, as well as civic education and strengthening the civil society. They have funded, pushed, and worked together with local NGOs on these issues, often favouring those who criticize the government[79]. This development has helped create an image of 'two sets of civil society organisations, one viewed by some as "working for the country" and another "working for foreign interests". Various actors have expressed that this situation has given rise to suspicions about donors' hidden agendas'[80]. The government's attacks on those 'working for foreign interests' has been effective, in that it has silenced many human rights promoters[81]. This effective silencing is partly due to passivity from international actors who 'have been reluctant to defend those NGOs for fear of antagonizing the Rwandan government'[82]. Their passivity is mainly due to three reasons, firstly to the fact that there are many who are impressed by the government and say that stability is important and democracy is a long-term process. Secondly, passivity towards the government from international actors in Rwanda in general has to do with feelings of guilt over the failure to prevent the 1994 genocide. As we saw above, the government sees to it to remind international actors about the failure of the international community to stop the genocide. Thirdly, some have invested significantly in the development process in Rwanda, and therefore want to see successes rather than setbacks[83].

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[77] Front Line 2005: 101.
[78] Uvin 2003: 1. See also Reyntjens 2004, Uvin 2003, Front Line 2005, Lemarchand 2004, CORDAID et al 2003. For recent attacks on Rwandan journalists, see http://allafrica.com/stories/200602010652.html.
[79] Front Line 2005: 95ff, 108ff.
[80] Kimonyo et al 2004: 60, see also 54, 91.
[81] See for example Front Line 2005.
[82] Front Line 2005: 95.
[83] See Front Line 2005: 95-96, and, more general, Uvin 2004: 80, 89, 95-96. See van Ufford (1993: especially 155) on why donors want to see successes.

Thus, May-July 2005, when this Minor Field Study was conducted in Rwanda, is a time when local NGOs have to be very careful with what they are saying and doing, not only because the government can be tough, but also because they have learned that international NGOs and donors largely will not stand up publicly for them when problems arise[84]. It is a time when some rights-based practitioners are afraid, and have understood, if they had not already, that because of their new approach their work will now be much more difficult than before[85]. The next section will discuss the adjustments that are made in rights-based NGOs to handle their difficult situation.

4.2. RBA Practitioners' Perceptions and Adjustments to Political Constraints

Based on the political situation as it has been described above, this section will focus more on my interviews and observations with RBA practitioners. It will account for how some RBA practitioners perceive the situation, and be followed by examples of how the rights-based practitioners adjust to the difficulties, before moving on to the final section which will discuss more in detail what implications the political environment can have for the implementation of RBA.

Fear within the rights-based NGOs

Many of the local (i.e. Rwandan) RBA practitioners that I interviewed were worried when human rights were to become part of their work. Pelagie remembers the first time she heard of RBA: "Are we changing to Human Rights Watch? Will we be a watchdog to rights? They were talking about new directions. I was not feeling really comfortable with it". Another RBA practitioner, John, is working in an organisation where they are currently discussing the risks with RBA. He is worried, for his life and his family. His fears may very well have been growing after the incidents in 2004.

"If I for example as an RBA [employee] am to meet a local authority, the chance is that I can even be stopped by [him]. He can put me into prison. … The best way would be to prevent the risk. … But so far there is nothing concrete. Maybe the life of a staff member is in danger, because of what we are doing. What will be the responsibility of our NGO, if someone gets stopped in Gisenyi[86]? The responsibility will be on my wife, my kids".

[84] For the importance of international NGOs to 'show the way'; to stand up and protect independent national human rights actors, see Uvin 2004: 142-3.
[85] The Senate has commissioned a new study, that in late 2005 was not yet published, which will identify ideas such as 'divisionism' and 'genocidal ideology' among international NGOs and scholars (Human Rights Watch 2006).
[86] Gisenyi is a town in the northwest of Rwanda.

The shift to RBA has brought with it, at least for some staff members, a concern for their lives and the safety of their families. The nature of their work is changing with a RBA and the way Rwandan politicians perceive their organisation is probably changing even more, as was described in the previous section. Some members of organisations that have been supported by rights-based NGOs have fled the country and some people opposing the government have disappeared; the fear is not unfounded.

Rights-based NGOs' adjustments

The rights-based practitioners perceive the current situation in different ways. Emmanuel, a country director, says that he finds the government "fairly receptive", and that talking about human rights is "not so sensitive". Most of the people I have interviewed would not agree; rights-based practitioners' views differ and so does the way they adjust to the situation. I have observed four different strategies that the rights-based NGOs have undertaken.

Changing the language: A practical and fairly simple way for RBA practitioners to adjust to the difficult political situation in Rwanda is to be careful with what language they use. As Alex, a local rights-based practitioner, says: "because we were worried, we actually don't talk so much about RBA in our organisation. [It is] only words [and if we use them] it can be misinterpreted by the government as a transfer to a human rights organisation".

Shifting towards economic and social rights: Another interviewee, Phocas, says that in his organisation they change more than just the language. They consider that it is not well perceived by the government but also that the population might not yet be ready for talking civil and political rights. "We focus more on [achieving] fully enjoyed socioeconomic issues. … You can build from that to engage people about civil and political rights". Regina, another rights-based practitioner, says that in her organisation they also avoid focusing on political and civil rights.

"Rights awareness in the country is sensitive, because many authorities in high positions don't like that people are aware of their rights. It seems to disturb the country. When someone claims publicly with posters, and like that, they don't like that. … But there are the most vital rights: a house, food, clothes, water, to have the small necessities – to be in life, to have a safe life. Authorities like when we focus on the basic rights and needs".

Analysing the risks: Bertrand, another interviewee, says that after the parliamentary report in 2004 "there was a time when we all wanted to stop, when we thought 'this is the Muzungo

[the white man] coming and saying this'" Now the staff has agreed to change their strategy and to think more carefully about the risks. They have to be careful since "there are people who are tracking what we do". Bertrand believes that they are always being watched, possibly even by people working within their own organisation.

Let the beneficiaries define their problems: Another way of getting around the problem seems to be to let the beneficiaries define their problems themselves. This can be done by letting communities themselves define the poorest households in the community or by working from the existing spaces, possibilities, and practical needs that people have. Felix, a local rights-based practitioner, asks "is our work there helping them [the beneficiaries] improving their livelihood conditions?" He answers "by involving them you have responses to those questions. Let's engage our beneficiaries". Then people will go from clients to citizens, Regina, another rights-based practitioner, says, and eventually they will own the policies that affect them. But there is no use in shouting out demands: "don't go in the street. It doesn't work". This strategy takes some focus away from the human rights language and takes place at a local level rather than in public arenas in the capitol.

Conclusions: Whereas 'changing the language' and 'shifting towards economic and social rights' can be seen as mere adjustments to a tight political environment, the last two strategies can be regarded as more positive, progressive changes. Analysing the risks should be a responsibility of an organisation which is putting its staff into a riskier position. And if one assumes that local ownership is important, the aim to let the beneficiaries define their own problems to a greater degree is clearly positive. Chapter 5 will discuss this last point in detail, referring to it as 'downward accountability'.

The evident adjustment: Don't mention ethnicity!

The Rwandan government's official strategy since 1994 when they took power has been to denounce any talk of ethnicity. According to the government, dividing the population into the three ethnic categories of Hutu, Tutsi, and Batwa, was nothing more than a colonial construct[87] and it has only caused discrimination and killings. Today, the government says, everybody is 'Rwandan'[88]. Following the RBA intention not to aid, but rather to change

[87] The categories Hutu, Tutsi, and Batwa existed before colonialism, but were 'racialized' and institutionalized during colonialism. See for example Prunier 1995, Newbury 1988.
[88] See Buckley-Zistel 2006.

discriminating structures, rights-based practitioners could be interested in analysing ethnic factors. For example, peasant Hutus may be discriminated in a community by Tutsi landholders who also happen to be running an association. If the rights-based international NGO would support this association they could very well be aiding discriminatory and conflictual structures more than anything else. But not talking about ethnicity in Rwanda is such an evident adjustment to the political situation that it is almost never mentioned. I met only one RBA practitioner that stressed the need for talking about Hutu and Tutsi. Nevertheless, if the political atmosphere in Rwanda had been totally free, rights-based practitioners and NGOs would probably have openly discussed the ethnic problems. They share the vision of the government that people should not organize along ethnic lines, but they would also want to make sure that it is not happening. The government's hard line does however not only target open talk about ethnicity, rather, they target what is perceived as ethnically biased actions and actors. They do it, as we have seen, by using terms like 'divisionism', 'genocide ideology', or even 'Hutu extremist propaganda'[89]. This means that rights-based practitioners not only abstain from considering ethnic factors, they also have to be careful not to make their work *seem* as though they were in any way basing it on ethnicity. It is for example suggested that the vast land reform that is about to be implemented in Rwanda[90] is generally in great favour of Tutsis, and is 'likely to generate considerable protest among Hutu peasants once it is put into effect'[91]. But international actors, and especially NGOs who do not have much political power, are not likely to discuss matters like this with authorities or other actors in Rwanda. To do so could very well be dangerous for the NGOs' survival and for the security of the staff. If they wanted to discuss the matter they would have to, very skilfully, dress it in another language. The message seems clear: Don't mention or work on matters that *could* be interpreted in ethnic terms. But there is an exception, the Batwa.

The Batwa: the meeting point between the government and rights-based NGOs

The third ethnic group in Rwanda, the Batwa, is considered the indigenous people of Rwanda and today consists of less than one per cent of the population. During 2003 and 2004 CAURWA[92], the largest Batwa organisation, was critical of the government and demanded

[89] See for example Willum 2001: 81.
[90] The new Land Act was signed into law by the president in July 2005 (EIU Country Report 2005: 12-13).
[91] Lemarchand 2004: 5. See also Human Rights Watch 2006.
[92] More information about CAURWA, and the Batwa, on http://www.unpo.org/member.php?arg=10.

particular recognition of the Batwa as an indigenous and historically marginalised group[93]. In other words, they demanded affirmative action[94]. One of the main areas of interest was the land reform. This made the official Ombudsman in Rwanda call CAURWA a 'divisionist' organisation, and the Minister of Justice demanded, in November 2004, that CAURWA suspended its activities[95]. In the summer of 2005 the situation seemed a bit better for CAURWA; it was still operating and was being supported by some international NGOs, some of them having a rights-based approach[96].

It seems that the issue of the Batwa is currently a meeting point for negotiation between the government and those international actors who actively want to avoid discrimination against groups in society. Some rights-based NGOs are assisting CAURWA and other Batwa organisations openly and the term Batwa is used in project proposals and other documents; would never happen with the terms Hutu and Tutsi. They argue, along with CAURWA, that the Batwa has been 'historically marginalised', a term used in the constitution[97], thus avoiding to talk about ethnicity. The government has agreed to discuss with CAURWA but has still not given them any official recognition[98].

4.3. Conclusion: How Does the Rwandan Political Environment Affect the Implementation of RBA?

So what do all these experiences teach us in our struggle to better understand what may influence the 'accounter' – the rights-based practitioner? It has been described how talking human rights in Rwanda is risky; you may be pointed out as having a 'genocidal ideology', or as being part of the 'hidden agenda of foreign interests'. You may be publicly accused and sense a fear for your own survival and for the future of your family. In short, being a rights-based NGO or practitioner in Rwanda is often extremely difficult. Of main importance for this paper, however, is how the political environment might affect the implementation of a RBA. I accounted for two strategies, currently taking place in the rights-based NGOs, where overcoming the difficulties could lead to positive effects. Firstly, some are trying to better understand the risks accompanied with different activities and perspectives. This could lead

[93] Front Line 2005: 41-43.
[94] See http://wwww.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/AllDocsByUNID/07d5fe6e3003a07e49256cf7001a13de.
[95] Front Line 2005: 42-43.
[96] Author's interviews with representatives for CAURWA and one of their international partners in July 2005.
[97] Article 82. The constitution can be found on http://www.rwandaparliament.gov.rw/constitution_eng.pdf.
[98] Human Rights Watch 2006.

the NGO to improve the protection of its staff. Secondly, some NGOs seek not to "take to the streets" with human rights, but aim instead at letting local beneficiaries define their own problems. Better analysing the risks could very well lead to the other two strategies that rights-based NGOs are using to overcome the difficulties. The first strategy is to change the way they talk about human rights so that it does not become 'misinterpreted'. The second is to focus more on social and economic rights, than on civil and political ones. This all concerns talking less about human rights, and that can become contradicting when the rights-based NGOs are to train other actors in talking human rights, and speaking up on human rights violations. This contradiction was clearly demonstrated when local NGOs who had been trained and supported by international NGOs and donors were left alone when the wind started blowing in 2004. When these local NGOs were publicly accused of being 'divisionists' and some local NGO practitioners fled the country, their international partners largely failed to stand up publicly to defend them. A Rwandan saying illustrates the contradiction well: '*Wibuba uhetse ukabawigisha uwo mu umugongo* – meaning if you steal when carrying a youngster on your back you are teaching the youngster to steal'[99]. When international actors do not themselves stand up for human rights the odds for teaching local actors to do so most likely decreases.

The fear that some practitioners sense, and the need to be very careful so that what you say or do is not interpreted as ethnically biased, may further affect how a RBA is implemented. We must also remember that many development practitioners are not used to work in these circumstances. Until recently, most of them have been nowhere close to being human rights defenders, but rather development practitioners of the kind who views its work as technical and non-political. It is also important to note, as we will do in the next chapter, that the RBA is not chosen by the staff but rather imposed by head offices outside Rwanda. Nevertheless, it should be acknowledged that despite difficulties and pressure from the government, some rights-based NGOs are still assisting CAURWA, the largest Batwa NGO in Rwanda.

The difficulties described in this chapter may discourage RBA practitioners to talk about practical realities and problems, either with each other, with local authorities or local partners. In chapter 6 we will see how RBA practitioners often talk in abstract terms about human

[99] Mbanda 1997: 48.

rights rather than about practical problems. This chapter has revealed several reasons for this ‘abstractionism’ to be a safe way out of a difficult political environment.

5 'Downward Accountability' – Rights-Based Attempts to Give More Power to Local Actors

The international aid system is complex but the procedures of applying, reporting and exchanging information are largely institutionalized[100]. One important aspect of the system is that the development policies and projects are most often planned and settled in the offices of international NGOs and donors[101], something that was largely confirmed by my material. There has been a long process before a particular project is known to those who are to benefit from it. When it reaches them, hundreds of pages are already produced about how the project is to be implemented, who will do what, and what the expected results are. If the beneficiaries want to change something in the setup of the project, they first have to convince the local NGO, who has to convince the rights-based NGO, who then needs to convince the donor that the change is necessary. The normal way of working in the international aid system makes it unlikely that the beneficiaries will be able to have a serious say in their own development. The rights-based NGOs and practitioners in this study are often aware of and try to overcome this problem. They work to create space within the aid system in order for local NGOs and beneficiaries to influence the activities that involve them. Here we will call this goal, following some RBA practitioners, 'downward accountability'. The mechanisms of the aid system are focused on upward accountability; the local NGO, for example, has to apply, report, and evaluate, upwards, to the international NGO. This chapter will focus on two crucial processes where rights-based NGOs and practitioners try to create downward accountability. The first is to create space within the organisation itself to be able to, despite the dependency of their donors, adjust better to demands from local NGOs and beneficiaries. The second is to change local NGOs so that they become more accountable downwards to their beneficiaries.

5.1. International Rights-Based NGOs Struggling to be Accountable Downwards

The survival of international NGOs depends on their donors. If they will not have a steady stream of projects and money they will not be able to pay rent on their offices, for their cars or their salaries. This is the core of the relationship between all international NGOs and their

[100] See Uvin 2004: especially 13.
[101] See Sampson 2002: 9-10.

donors. That said, the life of most international NGOs is stable in terms of survival, especially compared to many local NGOs. Nonetheless, the dependency situation is important to bear in mind as we describe rights-based NGOs' attempts to create downward accountability. I will first briefly outline how the RBA itself is imposed by donors, and then describe how rights-based NGOs and practitioners struggle to be accountable downwards.

The RBA is 'presented' to the Rwanda offices – resulting in resistance to the approach?

None of the organisations in my study seem to have adopted a RBA because of a request from the organisation's staff, local organisations or beneficiaries. Rather the approach has been imposed in different ways by the head office or by country directors. In one organisation, for example, the approach was decided at the head office in Belgium and was then 'presented' to the country offices around the world. A 'strategy paper' that had to be followed came with the presentation. The Rwanda office had to find ways to deal with the new situation; rejecting the approach did not seem to be an option.

The shift to RBA created resistance in some rights-based NGOs and has continued to do so, much because of the difficult political environment for human rights promoters in Rwanda. My interviewees, who were mostly in high or key positions in the NGOs, often described the resistance from the staff as belonging to the past. However, staff members were often described as 'not fully understanding' or 'not motivated'. I would like to keep the question of resistance open – considering the fear that some practitioners sense because of the rights-based approach, as well as the fact that they were not asked if they wanted the approach – and argue that one type of resistance can be to not fully understand or to work as little as possible[102].

Rights-based NGOs try to be accountable downwards despite donor demands

Many of the rights-based NGOs that I studied struggled with their everyday relations to their donors. Every donor has different demands when it comes to what, how, and for how long activities are to be carried out, how and when the reporting should be done, what indicators are important, and so on. A country director points out that this takes attention from the overall goals of the rights-based NGO itself. Instead, the staff members direct their work, reporting, and attention towards their different donors. In the following conversation, three

[102] Eriksson Baaz (2002: 166-168) writes about how resistance can 'become' passivity in the eyes of the viewer.

staff members of a rights-based NGO discuss the short-term thinking in the aid system. It is claimed to result in an inability to adjust to local realities and demands. But a solution is also proposed.

David	"We are only building capacities[103] for one organisation, and when they want to work on a project, we are not there. It has been too short-term."
Marie	"That's actually the challenge for us, short-term funding, but we have been here for more than 20 years."
David	"We just went with different groups and different issues because we have got different donors. One year they want to focus on HIV/AIDS. The other year it is environment."
Emmanuel	"I was sensitizing[104] a group in a community. I was telling them to plant trees, but they had no water to drink…"
Marie	"That's exactly why we have to integrate a RBA everywhere. Don't just go for HIV, or environment. It's all together. It's up to you."

Two negative examples from the organisation's history are brought up in this dialogue. First, when the partners have received 'capacity' and want to work on projects, the rights-based NGO is not there anymore. Second, because the rights-based NGO had money earmarked to plant trees, Emmanuel 'sensitized' people, who didn't have water, that they should plant trees. The failures are blamed by David on the fact that they have different donors who want different things. But a solution to the problem is also offered: "to integrate a RBA everywhere". By this Marie means that they should focus less on what the donor wants and more on what their own organisation wants. "It's up to you" to find space for what we really want to do, despite the donor's demands. But this can be difficult. ORBIS, another rights-based NGO that I studied, conducted an analysis of what the problems were in a given community. They wanted to find out what they and their beneficiaries think is most important and try to work from that as a starting point rather than from what their donors want. This analysis demanded a lot of money and work, and it created expectations among the population. Francois explains what has happened:

"A challenge with RBA is that the commitment in the first stage is big: … Together with the communities and the local stake-holders we find out what the problems are, the underlying problems, the root causes. And who the responsible actors are. We've done such an exercise in one province. It cost 18 000 USD – it demands too much money. … We now know what area needs particular attention. But still, we don't have a donor. If you do such an analysis, if we want to get to the real problems – it's like, it's a commitment. The population says 'what happens, what's next?'".

[103] 'building capacities' is a buzz word in the development community. It can refer for example to enhancing the rights understanding or the managerial skills of local NGO practitioners.
[104] 'sensitize' is another buzz word in the development community. It means roughly: 'make people understand that this (e.g. project) is important'.

Despite the commitment to the beneficiaries and the attempt to give them more of a say in their own development, ORBIS has not found any interested donor, and the result has instead been disappointment from the beneficiaries. What is perhaps even more difficult for the rights-based NGOs is when local organisations or communities are calling for a change *during* an ongoing project.

"The problem is when [the local partners] want us to adjust. Except for some donors, they can't accept changes. Some times it's a challenge. We are not accountable [downwards] because we can not change". (Marie)

One example of this, according to Marie, is when her rights-based NGO had a project with associations that were doing savings and loans. The goal was that the association would afford small investments in the future. Initial money was given from Marie's organisation. Marie thought the project would be sustainable (i.e. keep on running after she and her organisation had left) if the money was channelled through banks. "The members of the associations appreciated this idea". But the donors did not appreciate it. "Most donors were afraid the money wouldn't reach the associations". Marie had to follow the donors' will. She decided not to channel the money through any bank but to give them directly to the associations. Her fear came true, the project did not become sustainable; when it ended, "they shared all the money".

It is interesting here to note the donors' argument. The reason for not channelling the money through banks, according to Marie, was that they wanted to make sure that the money reached the communities. Thus, both the donors and Marie wanted to 'do good for the poor' but had different ideas on how to do so. The donors' idea on how to best reach the community in this case comes from a different source than Marie's. This is a clear example of how the system can make 'downward accountability' – that international NGOs listen and adjust to local NGOs, associations, and people – very difficult. The inability or unwillingness of the donor to adjust made Marie's rights-based NGO unable to respond to needs, reactions, and demands from their local partners.

5.2. Rights-Based NGOs Try to Make Local NGOs Accountable Downwards

An important aspect in rights-based NGOs' attempts to create downward accountability is to change the local NGOs, who are usually perceived as not having a 'rights understanding', or 'working for the poor'. I will point out some different ways in which rights-based NGOs try to change local NGOs and discuss how this is perceived by both local and rights-based NGO

practitioners[105]. However, the section will begin with a description of how mechanisms in the international aid system encourage local NGOs to work in the short-term and to focus more on what the international NGOs want than what their beneficiaries want.

The project: forcing local NGOs to look 'upwards' rather than 'downwards'

Most of the rights-based NGOs' activities go through local NGOs. Local NGOs often have smaller projects and less predictable inflows of money than their international partners. There are many reasons for this; one is that they have little access to 'the big money' from donor agencies such as the EU or USAID. Most often, the international NGOs get these funds. Thus, most local NGOs owe their existence mainly or only to international NGOs. According to George, an international aid worker who has worked extensively with local NGOs, this often gets the local NGOs stuck in a circle of reporting and applying,

"They [local NGOs] are fighting poverty but when you want to find time to talk about strategies about how to fight poverty you find that there is no time. Why? Because they are occupied with writing reports, looking for other funding, other programs. They are still working in a short-term project way. There is no time for anything else".

Many of the international NGO practitioners I interviewed do not believe that local NGOs are necessarily working to help the poor but that they rather strive to enrich themselves. George is one of those who doubt that local NGOs are working for the poor but contrary to many others he emphasized that the international aid system, and more specifically, 'the project', was a major cause to the problem. "They are fighting poverty", he says, but still there is no time to talk about *how* to actually fight the poverty. The project, as opposed to different kinds of long-term aid, is 'a typically short-term, time-bound, and predetermined set of actions with a clear aim, time line, and budget'[106]. It is based on the view that aid is technical; that results can easily be measured through a fixed set of indicators. Many, within academia, in the development world in general, and among my interviewees, agree that working through short-term projects is a bad thing. It encourages local actors to be accountable upwards rather than listening to their beneficiaries. And yet, it is still the prime way of working, in development aid in general[107], as well as in Rwanda. According to some of my interviewees, the

[105] I have interviewed both local human rights NGOs and local development NGOs. They are all partners with one or more international rights-based NGOs. Some of the local organisations have rights-based elements, but most have only a vague idea of what RBA is about.
[106] Uvin 2004: 164, see also 103.
[107] Uvin 2004: 164, 173-174. See also Sampson (2002: especially 5-6) about the specific project language.

development aid projects in Rwanda are now becoming even shorter, sometimes they are not more than a couple of months.

Rights-based NGOs striving to change local NGOs – the rights-based rationale

"Maybe they [local NGOs] try to be accountable to the international NGOs [because that is where the funds are]. What I am sure of is that they never, never, never, give their explanations to the beneficiaries." (International NGO practitioner)

As mentioned above, most international NGO interviewees do not think that local NGOs care much about 'doing good for the poor'. Some of the most common remarks I heard in interviews and observations from rights-based practitioners, was that local partners ”have no link to their beneficiaries”, ”little knowledge on human rights”, ”cannot criticize the government and other authorities”, ”are (therefore) not really independent”. Therefore the way to create downward accountability is to profoundly change the local NGOs. Rights-based practitioners argue that local NGO practitioners should ”work for the good of the poor”, ”enhance rights understanding”, ”learn a questioning way of thinking”, ”speak up on rights violations”, ”change their social attitudes”, ”become citizens” and ”activists”.

But the table can be turned around. Instead of focusing on what is lacking among the local NGOs, we can focus on the rights-based rationale, namely what makes the rights-based practitioners focus on these specific qualities. From this perspective, what the local NGOs are perceived as lacking are exactly the things that rights-based practitioners think is most important. Implicitly, since the right-based NGOs are the ones to improve the local NGOs, the rights-based practitioners regard themselves as having a better rights understanding and social attitudes etc. Therefore it becomes more important for rights-based practitioners and NGOs that the local NGOs are accountable downwards, than that the rights-based are so to the local NGOs. The material supports this stand: many discussions and trainings within the rights-based NGOs came to the conclusions that what had to be done better in the future was mainly to change local actors: *they* should get a better rights understanding. The rights-based rationale can, when it is used in this way, have the benefit of taking attention from failures in the rights-based NGOs own behaviour, such as the difficulties with being accountable downwards as laid out in the previous section, or ‘the project’ as a major cause to local NGOs’ inability to do good for the poor. I asked the question “Does a RBA change anything in the way you look at your own organisation?” to some rights-based practitioners. Some gave detailed answers, while others “were working on it”, or, like John, a country director, could

not or did not want to answer. He had given a detailed description of what a RBA meant in their work, but on this question he became silent. Until he answered "Big question. Such as? Very complicated. Really complicated. Internal for me, the rights-based approach. Can't you leave that question for me?" The rights-based approach here becomes about changing others, rather than your own organisation. And the actor to enforce this change is the rights-based NGO or practitioner.

Rights-based NGOs striving to change local NGOs – different perspectives

The interviews with local NGO representatives pointed in different directions. Many described some of the rights-based NGOs as their best partners, and it was not because it involved a lot of money, which it mostly did not. Instead, the positive aspects mentioned included long-term commitment, a continuing dialogue, the fact that the rights-based practitioners cared to leave the office in Kigali to go into the field, and follow-ups on the local NGOs. These things made the local NGO representatives feel that the rights-based NGOs were accountable to them. Thus, at least to local NGOs, accountability can be less about formal reporting and more about 'informal' aspects such as a long-term commitment and dialogue. The following-up that the rights-based NGOs were doing can also help satisfy their intention to make local NGOs accountable downwards.

On the other hand, local NGO practitioners also complained about growing pressure, less money, and lack of accountability from rights-based NGOs. Geoffrey, an executive officer at a local NGO, has gone through extensive application and training procedures with RIWD, a rights-based NGO. These procedures have as one of their most important aims to ensure RIWD that the local NGOs are accountable downwards. During the first six months of the year, Geoffrey's local NGO has not gotten the opportunity to carry out projects, which means they have not received any money, and they are now delaying their payments. Instead, he has been discussing with and receiving training from RIWD and other international NGOs.

"I was asking them [RIWD]: the 5 priorities you have – Do you think that it is our priorities? Have you done a stakeholder analysis[108] with us? Our aspects, views, they are not taken into account. … We are just meant to be in a situation. I hate to use the word of beggar. Now it's July, we have done no projects, we are only discussing with people. … We are not equal partners. I wish even I get this one [6 month project]. We are delaying so much".

[108] A stakeholder analysis is an analysis that, in this case, the local NGO is made to do by rights-based RIWD. It serves to find out what the problems are among the local stakeholders/beneficiaries.

Here, the way for RIWD to ensure downward accountability is to increase demands on the local NGO. At least in the initial stages, a RBA can be more about demands and training and therefore often involve less or no money. The shift towards smaller projects and more demands on the local NGOs makes it difficult for the organisation to pay rents and salaries, to survive as an organisation. Additionally, it makes it more difficult for every individual local NGO staff to live well instead of in poverty, since the income from the local NGO may be their only source of income[109]. The fact that local NGO works not only for the benefit of their beneficiaries but also for their staff, is affirmed by Felix, representative for the local NGO L.G.R.

"Before, during the emergency period [roughly until 1999], the international NGOs just gave projects and money without much demands. So we got funds for institutional costs. Today it is difficult to maintain the house and staff. It pushes us to reduce activities in the rural areas. We find activities but no one to do it. ... We can pay no salaries".

This local NGO, L.G.R., appear to scale down activities that are 'to do good for the poor' rather than to have less staff or institutional costs. This kind of thinking makes Angela, who is working for L.G.R.'s rights-based partner ACCUS, claim that local NGOs see themselves as "central in the universe ... the survival of the NGO is most important". She wants this to change. "To change that, we showed a drawing on how this does represent a real life situation. Through that we tried to stimulate the consciousness on what our role [as NGOs] actually is". This and other activities made L.G.R. come to deeper understanding, according to Angela, even if "they will not change overnight". But Felix does not agree that his local NGO L.G.R. have got a deeper understanding. Instead, Felix says about ACCUS, "They don't accept your approach. They have their own approach. ... They didn't accept to find a solution. You have to do it strictly like they want". ACCUS´ argument is that their approach is the best way to get an impact, Felix says, while "other partners let you choose how to do it. The other partners say 'show us how you are going to make impact'. And if you show it, you will get the project".

Making L.G.R. 'more conscious', as Angela said, for Felix becomes only about adjusting to the will of ACCUS. Thus the L.G.R. practitioners may not have become aware of much more than the fact that if they want to have projects with ACCUS they have to adjust to their way of doing things. Rather than discussing what the role of their local NGO should be and how to solve the problems, L.G.R. has to 'understand' its role. Is it, for example, possible for L.G.R.

[109] Uvin 2004: 103.

to instead have a different opinion on what their role is? And if this would be possible, what would it take to make L.G.R. realize that it can have a different opinion on issues like this without risking the next project? When a rights-based NGO sets out to work as ACCUS is doing, it has already decided how the local NGO should work, and think, to become accountable to their beneficiaries. The rights-based NGO will benefit those who learn best how they should act and speak. What can be lost, since there is little room for other perspectives, is the very consciousness that ACCUS seeks. It is important that the local NGOs have a say in the processes that affects them, but it is also important – more important according to the local NGO representatives Felix and Geoffrey – that the local NGO practitioners become accountable downwards in a particular way. Here there is a conflict between the rights-based NGO's intention to be accountable downwards to their local partners, and their intention to change the local NGOs to become more accountable downwards.

5.3. Conclusion

Rights-based NGOs in this study acknowledge that the aid system is focused on upward accountability and work to give local actors more of a say in the process, to create downward accountability. This chapter has accounted for two important processes. First, we saw that some rights-based NGOs try to adjust more to local stakeholders despite contrary demands from their donors. They have often found it very difficult to make their donors adjust to the will of the rights-based NGO and their beneficiaries. If the rights-based NGO fails to satisfy their beneficiaries growing expectations, the attempts to create downward accountability can instead generate growing disappointment among local populations. Second, the rights-based NGOs work to change the local NGOs to be more accountable to their beneficiaries. There can be a conflict between the rights-based NGOs' intention to be accountable towards its local partners, and the intention to change the local NGO to be more 'accountable downwards'. For example, if the local NGO L.G.R. wanted to co-operate with rights-based ACCUS the best way seemed to be not to argue or raise objections, but rather to go along with the will of ACCUS. A way for rights-based NGOs to be more accountable to local NGOs can be the partnerships with continuous dialogue and long-term commitment. These partnerships are appreciated by the local NGOs and make them perceive the rights-based NGO as

accountable[110]. At the same time, they can give the rights-based NGOs possibilities to see to it that the local NGOs are accountable downwards. Still, it is difficult to know if the local NGO is *really* changing, or if it is simply adjusting its voice to the interests and vision of the international NGO at the cost of listening to the beneficiaries[111]. The aid system, and in particular 'the project', has created a situation where international aid discourses are mirrored by local actors – governments, local organisations, and beneficiaries simply learn what their funders want to hear[112]. Local actors 'know that in order to access the manna of aid, they need to talk the talk and walk the walk of the aid agencies'[113]. Therefore it is very difficult to know if you are *really* reaching people, if they will tell you what they *really* want and need, and if they will *really* learn what you want them to learn.

The questions raised by this chapter point to a difficult contradiction: It is possible that both local and international NGOs, as well as donors, have a rights-based approach and/or a 'rights understanding', and talk about giving more power to local actors. While at the same time, since NGOs may adjust primarily because they depend on the money that comes with development aid projects, they are not giving the beneficiaries a voice in the process. This chapter shows that local NGOs are still primarily trying to adjust their way of working to the demands of their international rights-based partner; it is still about upward accountability.

[110] This approach is also advocated by others. It touches on development debates about how to ensure 'authentic partnership' (see Hoksbergen 2003: 12). Uvin (2004: 133ff, 175) talks about a radical capacity building approach.
[111] See Hoksbergen 2003: 7.
[112] See Chabal and Daloz: 117-118.
[113] Uvin 2004: 36.

6 ‘Abstractionism’ – the Culture of Not Sharing Practical Experiences

This chapter will deal with the process where rights-based practitioners focus on the language and the vision of RBA, thus making the approach more abstract than practical. This process will be referred to as ‘abstractionism’. The term is developed for this thesis in an attempt to pinpoint a process prevalent in my observations and interviews. The chapter will begin by introducing some human rights debates. The purpose is to show a discrepancy between the universal human rights discourse and local realities. I will then focus on the process of ‘abstractionism’ by first looking closer into how the language and the vision of RBA are spread throughout the rights-based organisation itself and discuss how it works when a ‘common understanding’ of the RBA is to be created among the staff. The third part of the chapter will present an observation from a meeting between a rights-based NGO and their beneficiaries, the local people that are to benefit from their current project. It will further make clear how an ‘abstractionism’ at work can diminish practical experiences in favour of the vision of the RBA and the rights-bearing, responsible, citizen that it wants to create.

6.1. Universal Human Rights and Local Realities

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood. (Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – adopted and proclaimed by the General Assembly of the United Nations 10 December 1948)

It does not matter much which aid brochure, social struggle, or international conflict you encounter today, almost all will be imbued with the language of human rights. It is the prime language of describing inequalities, as well as fighting them, of our time, and it has given people a strong tool to fight against oppressors and human rights violations. Many indigenous groups, trade unions, women’s groups and so on, have learned to use the language of human rights and are often supported by international organisations in their fight[114]. The ultimate goal of the universal human rights project is that the words spelled out in various declarations will become reality, namely that all human beings will enjoy all human rights. Although they are often advocated in declarations as given by nature, human rights are constructed through

[114] See for example Ishay 2004: for instance 293-313.

ambiguous, violent, and complex histories all over the world[115]. Pinpointing the most important meanings and history of human rights is therefore difficult. Many argue, however, that human rights have played their most important role in the history and context of Western liberal democracy[116] with the French revolution in 1789 as the crucial starting point[117]. This interpretation or focus casts doubts on the universal, neutral nature of human rights, and suggests that they rest on assumptions of a certain kind of legality, a certain language, and a certain world view which contains for example an autonomous rights-claiming individual and a strong (neutral) state which fulfils rights. Even though most countries in the world have signed several UN documents on human rights, and even if rights talk is now going on all over the world, Western powers and states still consider themselves the authoritative interpreters of human rights[118]. The postcolonial theorist Phillip Darby argues that 'what stands out about contemporary conceptions of global order is their oneness …: that of one world. The vision is of peoples everywhere, linked together, bound for a single destination. Its evangelical appeal meshes neatly with the reassertion of Western leadership'[119]. The 'oneness' models, such as universal human rights, are seen as self-sufficient. What African agents, for example, 'accept as reason for acting' or their particular historicity, 'are, to many, of no value'[120]. Following this, for example ethnic violence stands out as ugly manifestations of the local, as failures to link up with the universal project, and this universal (mainly Western) project is therefore freed from responsibility. The roots of malfunctioning lie in traditional societies, conveniently ignoring the role of external involvement[121]. The local is seen as something in need of the global, such as human rights.

The struggle for universal human rights, in other words, is often presented as taking place in a neutral terrain, as somewhere outside politics. This results in a difference-blindness. The world becomes divided into those who have human rights (the West/North) and those that are to receive rights (the rest). Therefore, it can be argued that Islam, for example, does not fit with the human rights discourse since it is regarded as having a static divine-based law, since

[115] See Ishay 2004 and Wasserstrom et al 2000: especially 15, for an in-depth description of the different histories of human rights.
[116] Englund 2001, 2004, Wasserstrom et al 2000, Chanock 2000: especially 16-17, Penna and Campbell 1998, Shivji 1999, Tiyambe Zeleza 2004.
[117] Rights had been debated before but the 1789 revolution spelled out rights like liberty, property, and resistance to oppression more clearly. It opened up the debate and gave it an immense push forward (Wasserstrom et al 2000: 11ff).
[118] Penna and Campbell: 7.
[119] Darby 2004: 8.
[120] Mbembe 2001: 7.
[121] Darby 2004: 10.

it is anti-individualist, and so on. But what is hidden, or ignored, by the narrow human rights definitions is 'the astonishing pluralism, range, and long history of Islamic jurisprudence on such topics as reason, public and international law, civil society, sovereignty, and, yes, human rights'[122]. And if human rights discourse can be dismissed in Islam, 'a religious and cultural system with one of the world's oldest and continuous textually based legal traditions, the contempt that awaits cultures with oral legal traditions is predictable'[123]. When universal human rights are advocated, it is presupposed that non-Western cultures don't yet have it or don't yet know what it is. Therefore, for example African societies can be regarded as not having human rights values and norms, despite their 'struggles against slavery and colonialism, and more recently against postcolonial tyrannies and structural adjustment programs'[124].

Those criticizing the universalization of human rights, in the way mentioned above, are often in their turn criticized for being cultural relativists. 'Today, culture has become a language of rulers'[125], it is argued. African leaders, for example, have used the rights to 'culture', 'development' and 'self-determination' to suppress their populations[126]. Much of this debate between 'universalists' and 'relativists', which has been perhaps the most intense discussion over human rights[127], has however been of a overall universalist nature. So called cultural relativists often try to find equivalent values in non-Western cultures so as to find a definition of human rights that encompasses all cultures or at least many[128]. Their end goal is ultimately the same as with the universalists – to find the perfect formula that is applicable to all societies. More recent literature on human rights try to go another way, arguing that 'the search for a single theory that seeks to provide definitive guidance in all cases is quixotic … because of the existence of irreducible difference and contingency across contexts and situations'[129]. Human rights, when advocated as universal, may always imply blindness to other cultural and historical specificities.

[122] Tiyambe Zeleza 2004: 11.
[123] Tiyambe Zeleza 2004: 11.
[124] Tiyambe Zeleza 2004: 13.
[125] Mamdani (2000:2) referring to Chanock (2000). See also Chanock 2000: 15-36.
[126] See for example Hyden 1993: especially 262.
[127] See Ishay 2004: 10.
[128] Ahmed An-Na'im and Deng (1990: for instance 9-11), and Ahmed An-Na'im (1992) are two examples of attempts to seek such a development through honest evaluations comparing different cultures.
[129] Cowan et al 2001: 21.

Harri Englund advocates a local approach to human rights. His case study from Malawi shows how NGOs that teach human rights to local citizens do not care much about the local realities where they are working, such as existing and important proverbs. Instead, they work through, for example, 'civic education' where they teach the instrumental package of human rights. This practice has impact on local communities however the result might not be what the NGO had intended: the rights talk, because it is not based in the historical experiences of the people, becomes re-interpreted in the local context. In this particular case, Englund argues that because of the unlimited freedom the child was perceived to be given by human rights, a conservative counter-discourse was fuelled in Malawi. When children got drunk, for example, it was blamed on too much freedom, and in the end too much democracy and rights[130]. This suggests that if human rights are to be rooted in a society it has to find meaning and bearing in that particular society[131]. Universal human rights have helped many oppressed groups in their struggles, but the universal human rights discourse as outlined above also further illustrates the point made in chapter 3; a growth of knowledge about a certain way of thinking (about human rights) may be accompanied by a growth of ignorance about other ways of thinking and acting.

Two approaches to human rights can be discerned for the purpose of this thesis. The first has been described above as the universalist stand; actors have a pretty fixed understanding of what human rights are and should be and that they are good if not necessary for other cultures and peoples. We may call this approach *instrumental*, since it sees human rights as a universal and neutral instrument to enhance all people's rights. This approach can lead to a process of 'abstractionism', which will be further discussed in the following sections. The second focuses more on the process and seeks to do things in the right(s) way. A proponent for such a *processual* approach could argue that the most important building-block of human rights in Africa is the recognition that it must be anti-imperialist, democratic and 'unreservedly in the interest of the "people"'[132]. Difficult issues lay ahead for proponents of this approach such as who 'the people' is or how to find out what their interest is, but in any case this perspective tries to overcome the blindness of the instrumental approach by adjusting to local realities rather than believing that the human rights package in itself is a quick-fix. As we will see below, a RBA often becomes instrumental rather than processual.

[130] Englund 2001: 307-308.
[131] see Darby 2004: 10-11.
[132] Shivji quoted in Penna and Campbell 1998: 11.

6.2. The Rights-Based Vision is Spread throughout the International NGO

I participated in a three-day meeting that BONA, an international rights-based NGO, had with its senior staff. The meeting served to evaluate their experiences with RBA, as well as to propose future adjustments. As one participant, Rafiki, put it after the meeting:

"I think the meeting we had was useful. We have had several meetings talking about RBA and future planning, a lot of reports and documents. Every time it was about talking. But no commitments. … This meeting, it was to go back, and then decide what the key concrete actions should be. For me it was important."

There is clearly reason to view this meeting as more constructive and concrete than earlier meetings. I will, however, focus on some abstract aspects that were still prevalent during the meeting. Towards the end of the third and last day of the meeting, we are divided into smaller groups. The group I am observing discusses partnerships and they are given some keywords to guide them, such as accountability and power. There are four participants in the group. Anne is seen by the country director as the person with the most detailed knowledge about RBA, and has an important position in the organisation. Bertrand is also regarded as being quite knowledgeable about RBA and has a key role in the organisation. The other two, David and Patrick, have less significant roles in the organisation. The staff's position in the hierarchy in BONA often correlates to how well a particular employee understands RBA[133]. The dynamics in the small group I am observing here is an example of this. The more knowledgeable someone was seen to be on the approach, the more space to talk they were given during the group discussion. We enter the discussion just as it begins.

Anne is expected to come later. Bertrand, who is also seen by others as acquainted with the approach, takes the lead: "They want us to identify barriers and what we can do about it". Everybody structures the headlines ("barriers", "what can we do about the barriers?" etc.) on their notepads (that they were given at the first day of the meeting).

Bertrand's phone rings. He takes the call and talks using his handsfree. David's phone is also ringing. He answers. Patrick and I sit for some seconds in silence. Bertrand finishes his call.

Bertrand		"We are not accountable to partners [local NGOs]"
…	…	…
Bertrand		"Do we share financial aspects [reporting what money has been spent on what] with partners?"
David		"Narrative reports are normally shared".
Patrick		says that they don't share financial aspects with local partners and asks, in a critical way, why they would do that.

[133] Internal BONA-document: Authors archive.

David and Bertrand	responds that the organisation *has* to have transparency and accountability, so they *have* to do it.
Bertrand	writes down on a flipchart which will later be used to present the results for the other groups: "To be done better – share narrative and financial reports with partners".

What is striking throughout my interviews and observations is that when talking about RBA it is often described as utopia, as the final goal. "We should promote accountability and responsibility", or "It is about changing power relations". Less often these goals are described in more detail. In the discussion above, Patrick asks the group *why* they should share the financial aspects with their partners. Bertrand and David answer that they *have* to do it because they *have* to be 'transparent' and 'accountable'. These buzz words become arguments in themselves, heavy enough to end the discussion. Patrick does not raise the issue again. But what the term 'transparency', for example, means, or should mean, for this particular NGO is never discussed during the group discussion. There is an absence of questions such as "What do we mean with transparency?" and "Should we share *everything* with our partners and beneficiaries?"

In another rights-based NGO, Oliver, a country director, asked his staff if they thought they should be fully transparent. Should they, for example, inform their beneficiaries on how much the staff members earn every month? Oliver's staff thought it was a bad idea. It would, they said, create suspicion and envy amongst an already suspicious population. I don't know whether or not the beneficiaries would react with growing suspicion or envy, or what affects that would have. The point is that only when the actual content of the buzz words will be carefully scrutinized will one begin to know what it will mean in practice to talk about the goal 'transparency' or other buzz words. But there is a big lack of questions such as "What parts of the vision of transparency can we try to achieve and what will this give, and which parts will we leave out, and why is that?" Another important aspect that the example of Oliver's staff shows is that giving away power, making it easier for beneficiaries and partners to question you, is not always fun. Maybe the price to be paid goes under the name of suspicion, or envy? And maybe the (rights?) claim from the beneficiaries or the local NGOs will be that the staff lowers their salaries? In the group discussion that we are following this way of scrutinizing the words is rare. When Anne turns up the picture changes; David and Patrick become less active while Anne and Bertrand, those who are seen by the country director as having more expertise of RBA, engage in discussions.

David is away. Anne has said the three latest points and Bertrand writes them on the flipchart. Bertrand needs help from Anne to formulate some of the points.

Bertrand	"Our projects end in two years, that's the problem. Then if we don't find new funds, it's a problem [because we are no longer in contact with our partners]".
Anne	"We don't need money for having partnerships".
Bertrand	"You need to be paid.."
Anne	"Let's leave the thinking that partnerships are dependent on projects".

Here it is Bertrand that makes a practical objection: "you need to be paid". He points out the economic dependency of their organisation. Everybody knows it, but Bertrand takes that fact into consideration when discussing the goal of having partnerships that are not dependent of projects, i.e. money. However, it does not become a point of further discussion, instead it becomes a point on the flipchart that "partnerships should not be dependent on projects".
As the group discussion comes towards a close, Anne talks about what it means to share financial aspects with partners and how that would make BONA more accountable downwards. But there is no discussion about it and the will to interact within the group in general has become low.

Bertrand	"How can we be more accountable?"
Anne	"Are we encouraging our partners to hold us accountable?"

Patrick is back. Bertrand looks to Anne to formulate a point.

Anne	"We tend always to report against expectations [to our donor]. It was planned 100 but I spent 99. But this does not hold us accountable [to our local partners]. Then [if we were accountable downwards, to our partners] they can ask, for example 'for this 1 million Rwandan Francs that you bought trees – was it relevant to spend this money for this purpose?' "
Bertrand	writes on the flipchart: "organise opportunity to discuss expenditures against results, achievements, outputs".

The group after this point dissolved itself and went for coffee and snacks. "I think this is sufficient", Anne said to David, when it was time to go back to the seminar room for group presentations. After the presentations the consultant comments the group's findings. While saying that other groups have been thinking more traditionally (which means not so good), he finds the points made by our group "evolutionary".

After this meeting, I discussed RBA with Jean, another employee in a key position in BONA. He indicates that a staff member can have an understanding of RBA but still not know how to make it part of their work.

"85% of the staff have a basic understanding [of RBA] … But in programming they don't understand. … They are waiting for someone else to come and integrate the RBA. They understand RBA but they don't understand how to make it part of their work".

How is this possible? Doesn't understanding RBA imply that you know how to use it? In fact, the problem in this organisation mirrors the general debate on RBA where it is often said that the theory is well worked through and understood whereas practice is lagging behind. In other words, local realities are not what is building the rights-based approach. Instead, RBA here comes with blindness to local realities, similar to the difference-blindness that came with the universal human rights discourse.

In what way can the observation of the group discussion respond to this gap, this paradox regarding the understanding of RBA? When the group's work is labelled "evolutionary" by the consultant it is much thanks to Anne. Most of the points on the group's flipchart were made by her. Therefore, if Anne, perceived as the RBA expert in the organisation, had herself been thinking and writing points on the flipchart, the response probably would have been even more positive. What has been rewarded here is the right way of thinking. What has been made invisible, on the other hand, are the critical practical obstructions like "we have to be paid also when we change our work" or "why and how should we be more transparent and accountable?". It seems that a 'common understanding' is for everyone to understand the nice-sounding goals of RBA, rather than for everyone to take into account one another's practical experiences, objections, and suggestions.

It now begins to make sense that people 'understand' RBA in the way that they learn what it should be like, but that they at the same time "don't understand how to make it part of their work" – how to overcome the practical barriers in their everyday work. 'Abstractionism' – the process of neglecting practical experiences in favour of learning the theory of RBA – was repeated during meetings with other organisations as well. For example, during a one-week-training on RBA for another international NGO where they were to discuss past experiences and future planning, the consultant talked about the need for participation from the local population. But an employee, Mark, said that participation could be complicated.

Mark points out that there can be a danger with the current way of seeking participation. "Sometimes we just call for a meeting, and the leader [local authority, e.g. the mayor] speaks, and people just listen. That can even have a contrary effect." I think he means that this becomes a manifestation of power rather than enabling people to participate. The consultant, Geoffrey, responds: "Did you sign a contract with your organisation?". Mark answers yes. Geoffrey continues: "Does it say anywhere in it that you will have an easy job?" His comment is followed by a burst of laughter among the participants, before he goes on with his next point.

It is of course possible that practical issues were dealt with in a more serious way when I was not attending the training[134], or that it is discussed during other – formal or informal – meetings between the staff. The aim with providing these examples is not to explain everything; it is to demonstrate a tendency that has been evident throughout most of my interviews and observations. This tendency is to different extents observable also to some rights-based practitioners. For example, after a meeting with practitioners from different rights-based NGOs which was meant to share experiences and discuss future co-operation, a local rights-based practitioner, Robert, had this to say:

Robert	"What's so interesting about these meetings is that no one speaks about things, experiences. Nobody shares practical issues."
Me	"Why do you think it is that way?"
Robert	"They don't want to show their weaknesses, or how much they earn, for example."
Me	"Yes, but why don't they even share positive experiences?"
Robert	"I think it becomes a culture."

To not share practical experiences can even become a culture, in the sense that actors get used not to sharing information even when they could talk about positive experiences. To not share practical experiences is probably not unique to people working with a rights-based approach[135]. But the point has been made here, in regards to RBA specifically, that a focus on the linguistic, abstract aspects of RBA, a focus on 'abstractionism', can be enough to be rewarded in the rights-based NGO. In this process, the vision is more important than practical obstructions, other realities, other representations.

6.3. The Rights-Based Vision is Spread to Local Rwandans

This section will focus on what can happen when rights-based practitioners are interacting with those who are to benefit from their activities, the beneficiaries. The project we will focus on here is in a phase where the international rights-based NGO, FIA, has secured its funding with their donor and is discussing practical details with local NGOs and smaller associations of how to best implement the project. As we have seen in chapter 5, it can often be difficult for local actors to have a serious impact in these discussions since the goals, methods, and proposed results of the project are already outlined in detail between the rights-based international NGO and its donor. In any case, this phase ought to be a good time for the

[134] I attended about a third of this training
[135] Hobart (1993) talks about a similar phenomenon in development aid in general. Sampson (2002: 7) talks about abstract vs. concrete knowledge in development aid.

beneficiaries if they want to have a say about the outline of the project. In fact, the day I was doing my observation, two staff members from FIA, Emmanuel and Michel, went to meet a local women's association that had been proposed to be the beneficiaries of the project by a local NGO. This was the first time the women in the association got an opportunity to meet representatives from FIA directly, without going trough the local NGO. We will get back to the field trip and what the rights-based practitioners Emmanuel and Michel had to say about it soon. First, however, the goal, methods, and the underlying vision of the project need to be described a bit further.

The vision of the rights-bearing, responsible, global citizen

The overall goal of FIA's project is to enhance local Rwandans understanding of human rights, as well as their ability to stop human rights violations and to realize their human rights. It focuses on groups with many violated rights and little power such as women and orphans. The enhanced rights understanding will mainly be created through training. The way it is carried out resembles much what is called civic education, an increasingly popular way of working in the development community[136]. Civic education, and this particular project, goes something like this: staff from international and local NGOs, and other experts, produce a training manual. Based on this manual they train trainers who are often staff in local NGOs. These trainers in their turn train one or a couple of trainers each from various local communities. Finally, the trainer(s) in the local community train the people in their respective community. Below is an extract from one out of ten chapters from such a training manual on civic education.

Chapter 2: Understanding human rights

2.1 Introduction
A dignified human existence depends on fundamental freedoms that all individuals are entitled to and which enable him/her to lead a decent life differentiating them from other animals. Different communities in which individuals live and the state should guarantee these fundamental freedoms, protect them and promote them. Citizens should also fight for these freedoms and defend them as their rights.

2.2 Learning objectives
By the end of this chapter, participants will be able to:
- Describe what is meant by human rights.
- Identify the different types of human rights.
- Promote and defend human rights.

... ...

[136] See Englund 2001: 299-302, Englund 2006. See also Uvin (2004: 139-140) who talks similarly about training.

Recap

Causes of human rights violations
- Ignorance about human rights
- Failure to respect the rule of laws
- Authoritarian leadership and its consequences
- Disregard of all levels' and all actors' responsibilities within society

Citizens duties in promoting human rights
- Respect for the rule of law
- Educate other citizens, especially youth, on human rights values and norms
- Live together with other people peacefully
- Respect civil values and encourage independent civil institutions (household, family and associations)
- Play a role in reinforcing democratic principles among citizens and governing institutions

Ways to defend and protect human rights
- Denounce human rights violations
- Prevent human rights violations
- Defend victims of human rights violations
- Force perpetrators to stop violating human rights or develop strategies to limit human rights violations
- Find ways to allow human rights victims to exercise their rights

People involved in defending and protecting human rights
- All people, all over the world
- All leaders, at all levels of government in society
- Local associations
- All civil society organisations

Collaboration is of paramount importance when defending and protecting human rights as everybody at all levels is concerned with human rights issues.

Collaboration will focus on two main points
- To seek to be informed and to inform others about human rights and human rights violations.
- Action taken should be within existing laws (for civil society, see ways to use advocacy and community mobilisation in Chapters 9 and 10).

The manual will help to, as one RBA practitioner put it, "train people on how to be in society". This particular extract does so by painting the vision of the human rights-based society. Local people should be trained that they are 'citizens', who together with 'all people all over the world' are working to understand, inform about, defend and protect human rights. People are supposed to learn not only how to be, but also who they are, in society – a rights-bearing, responsible, global, citizen. But the manual also states that the trainer should 'ensure that methods used are effective and relevant to local situations'. In this section I will argue that there is a risk the trainer will not adjust much to the local context. The reason for this is that the mindset that lies behind RBA, or in this case, the civic education manual, does not want to be questioned. 'Abstractionism' rests on not adjusting to local contexts. Instead, the idea is that once local people have been helped to understand their situation in terms of human rights – "to deepen their analysis", as a rights-based practitioner put it – they will know how to deal with their practical problems.

‘Abstractionism’ at work

Let us now go back to Michel and Emmanuel from rights-based FIA and their meeting with the local women’s association, the beneficiaries of FIA’s current project. About twenty women, most of the members in the association, were present. After the meeting I interviewed the rights-based practitioners. Emmanuel thought that the rights understanding was insufficient among the group, which was good, because then they had much to learn. But he was impressed by them as well.

“What they said ... was really impressive. They said they would read newspapers, publications, news. It was a confirmation of the relevance of what we are doing to make changes in their everyday life. … I think the groups that are now targeted … are exactly the groups we want to focus on, people who don’t know their rights, the responsibility to claim the right. They don’t know how they can go about to affect the environment to realize the rights”.

Emmanuel describes the women’s lack of rights understanding as not understanding their responsibility to claim, nor how to realize, their rights. The women should for example understand that “if the mayor is violating my rights, I can go and see the prefect or another person who can advocate on my behalf”.

Women from the association, as Emmanuel states, said that they wanted to read newspapers. They also said that they wanted to learn about the United Nations Child Rights Convention, the Rwandan constitution, and government policies. I have to admit that I was very surprised to hear that rural Rwandans wanted to learn about these documents. The fact that they by saying this were almost quoting the goals of the project as laid out from FIA to their donor, made me ask if there could be a risk that the women had learned what to say in order to benefit financially from the project. Emmanuel answered:

“[It is] not because they want money. They need to know the rights, the rights of their kids. There is this sexual exploitation, parents are really very affected. They want to know the policy around it, if there is someone who is discovered abusing children’s rights, [they want to know] what they would do”.

Sexual exploitation was not mentioned during the field trip and it is not clear to me how and if Emmanuel was informed that sexual exploitation was a problem within this particular group, or if he refers to it as a general problem. I want instead to focus on how Emmanuel describes possibilities for change. He mentioned earlier that reading newspapers and publications will make changes in the women’s everyday life. As an example, they need to know policies and conventions so that they will know how to act in order to stop injustices such as sexual exploitations and abuses of their childrens’ rights. Emmanuel’s argument rests on the image

that the women presently have no idea on how to act when such problems arise. They are made into passive objects in need of help rather than active subjects with their own knowledge and power. Thus, they need to be empowered, and the way forward is to enhance their abstract rights understanding.

Practical problems on the other hand, practical human rights violations, were raised by the women. They raised issues of discrimination from other groups who harvest on their land or do not let them into the labour market. They talked about the lack of land and fertilizers. They argued that they needed education (saying that many drop out of school because they cannot afford material such as books, uniforms and fuel) in order to get jobs. They even made demands on FIA: "If you really want to assist us you should support kids to go to school". They criticized actors in their community as well as the government for not doing better. The women in the local association seemed to already have a human rights awareness. They did not say exactly "my human rights to food and education and non-discrimination are violated", but they raised issues that could very well be root causes to their problems; such as the lack of land, equal treatment, education, and employment. They were critical towards authorities and even made demands on the authority present – the rights-based NGO. They also had ideas on how to solve some of their problems. For example, they suggested that they could move into a village in order to get closer to infrastructure, health care and schools, and they asked Emmanuel and Michel if it was possible to integrate a micro-finance project within the present project. In short, the women were able to understand what (in their opinion) was lacking, to propose solutions, and to criticize authorities, the things they are supposed to have learned when the project is finished. But the rights-based staff did not have the same understanding as me when we talked after the field trip. Although Michel mentioned the discrimination and the lack of land that the women were talking about, neither Emmanuel nor Michel mentioned any of the other problems or requests that I mentioned above. They focused instead on other aspects, such as the abuses of children, which the women needed help to solve. Michel meant that the rights understanding was insufficient among the women.

"We will tell her she has the right to food. [She will respond] 'Really is it true in our own country?'. It's a contradiction. With that you will start to discuss: why is there no [fulfilment of the] right?".

By describing the surprise by which the women will hear that they actually have an unfulfilled human right to food, Michel shows that he did not understand the claims made by the women as rights claims or as an understanding of rights. This was due to cultural issues, he explained;

the Rwandan woman is not used to and does not know how to express herself in terms of rights. It is something she has to learn.

The question that arises here is: What does it actually mean to learn human rights? Based on the examples above the answer would be that the women should learn (1) *to overcome cultural barriers* such as abuses against children and the culturally based powerlessness to solve the problems which is due to an inability to express herself in terms of rights, (2) *to learn the rights language*, and read policies, rights documents and newspapers and (3) to understand *the responsibility to realize* the right by claiming it from authorities; if it does not work on the nearest level, the mayor, then the person with violated rights will go to the next level, the prefect.

Using this interpretation makes sense to understand why Michel and Emmanuel do not regard many of the issues brought up by the women as rights understanding or rights claims. While the women were mentioning practical problems and solutions the rights-based practitioners were more interested in changing the way the women understand their surroundings. The vision is that the women after this will have better possibilities to understand both their problems and how to realize their rights in a more proper way.

It should be clear that the project, at least at this early phase, is not much grounded in local knowledge. On the contrary, the project seems to be carried out according to the rights-based NGO's understanding of what is best for the women in the association. It is 'abstractionism' at work; learn the theory, the vision, and then (when?) care about the practical experiences and problems.

6.4. Conclusion: Blindness to Local Realities

This chapter has shown how rights-based NGOs have an *instrumental approach* in which universal human rights are regarded as an instrument which should first be learned, in order to later deal with problems. The *instrumental approach* stands in contrast to the *processual approach*, which focuses more on getting the process rights-based and thereby listen more to alternative voices and objections. The instrumental approach has been described here as leading to a process called 'abstractionism'. The chapter illustrated this process by presenting examples where rights-based practitioners in Rwanda were commended within the context of

their organisations if they could spell out the nice-sounding goals of RBA, and dismissed if they raised objections against it. A 'common understanding' within the rights-based NGOs concerns the theory or the vision rather than taking into account one another's practical experiences and obstacles.

The chapter also illustrated the process of 'abstractionism' by focusing on a meeting between rights-based practitioners and their beneficiaries. The rights violations that made the beneficiaries', in this case the women in the local association, lives difficult today were largely ignored by the rights-based practitioners. Instead, the RBA staff emphasized the lack of a human rights understanding among the women and focused on how to make this understanding better, how to make the women understand themselves as rights-bearing, responsible, global citizens. The idea is that once the women have an abstract rights understanding they will know how to solve their problems, but the chapter has shown how the abstract focus of RBA may dismiss local realities rather than offering tools to deal with them.

As long as rights-based practitioners will not focus more on making the process rights-based and take alternative voices more into account, we are left to hope that the rights-based vision is the right answer to the Rwandan problems. This thesis is not able to discuss if spreading the rights-based vision is the best solution, but Englund's case study mentioned in the first section of this chapter raises serious doubts. Englund argues that if human rights training or 'civic education' is not grounded in the society where they are to be implemented, they may very well be re-interpreted in the local context[137]. The vision of the rights-based approach may come out in a very different shape when it meets local realities.

[137] Englund 2001. See also Darby 2004.

7 Conclusion: RBA – a De-politicized and Technical Approach

The rights-based approach takes a stand against the traditional technical and non-political way of doing development aid. It claims to focus on the processes in the society and to give poor people power over the processes that involve them. But what exactly changes when a RBA is to be put into practice? This thesis argues that rights-based NGOs and practitioners, rather than listening to local actors, strive to change them: colleagues should reach a 'common understanding' of RBA, local NGOs should 'become conscious' of their roles as NGOs, and local beneficiaries should learn to understand themselves and their environment in terms of human rights. The universal human rights discourse supports the vision of the rights-based society. This vision becomes a goal in itself; as the best answer for all situations; as a 'regime of truth'. Therefore, other realities and representations, other 'truths', are not defined as rights struggles but are diminished or ignored in favour of an abstract rights understanding. The term 'abstractionism' has been developed for this thesis to describe this process of ignoring practical experiences.

The rights-based approach which this thesis has analysed is more political than 'traditional' development aid because rights-based NGOs are now in the midst of the Rwandan political game and are perceived as a threat by the Rwandan government. But it is still non-political, or rather de-politicizing, in as much as rights-based practitioners choose to ignore the politics of the day in favour of an abstract understanding of rights. In the process of 'abstractionism', rights-based practitioners ignore the daily rights struggles that local beneficiaries are currently involved in, they diminish practical experiences of their colleagues, and they force local NGOs to change their way of working and thinking rather than listening to them. The rights-based approach is therefore also technical since it sees human rights mainly as an instrument. Instead of seeing the everyday struggles of local staff, local NGOs and beneficiaries as having to do with human rights in a broad sense, human rights is seen as a specific instrument to understand ones environment and one self.

The political situation in Rwanda helps us to better comprehend the process of 'abstractionism'. In a country where it is dangerous to talk about struggles and to criticize

authorities – perhaps even more so if it comes dressed in the language of human rights – talking about human rights in an abstract way is a viable solution. If this is the case, though, one can ask if rights-based practitioners should encourage other actors to talk in terms of human rights when they themselves are afraid to do so. The question is all the more relevant since local human rights promoters, that had been trained and encouraged by international actors, were accused by the government in 2004 for spreading a 'genocidal ideology'. Some of the local NGO practitioners felt compelled to flee the country, others disappeared, but the international actors did not do much to protect the local NGOs. However, such questions are not raised by the rights-based practitioners in this study. They do not question if a RBA itself is an appropriate approach in Rwanda. Another important question should be: Is RBA a constructive approach when it creates an image in Rwanda of two sets of NGOs, one working for the government and one for 'the hidden agenda' of foreign NGOs?[138] If rights-based practitioners would ask these questions, they would risk their position in their organisation, or even their employment, or the survival of their organisation. The donors and head offices that the rights-based NGOs depend on are the ones that have imposed RBA on the rights-based NGOs. Together with the process of 'abstractionism' this donor dependence and enforcement is the fundamental problem. Rights-based practitioners and NGOs are not able, or do not see it as an option, to use RBA to question the approach as such. Neither do they work to seriously *challenge and change* the international aid system so that they can really be accountable downwards to local actors. Instead, they try to *find space within the system*, and focus on enhancing local NGOs' and beneficiaries' understanding of human rights in an effort to make them all into rights-bearing, global, responsible citizens.

Future Research

I will mention three of the most interesting future research topics. First, it would be interesting to focus on a specific project or a specific partnership having to do with RBA. This would give a more in-depth picture of the communication between different actors, and what kind of knowledge and views are rewarded and which are ignored. Second, a case study on a specific international rights-based NGO would give deeper understanding of internal dynamics, struggles and negotiations when it comes to the implementation of the approach. The timing for this is good since all rights-based NGOs in Rwanda and many NGOs in other countries as well are currently in the process of adopting this new approach. The third research topic

[138] See chapter 4.

would focus on a group of local Rwandans: How do they talk about social struggles? What do they lack, who do they blame, and how do they work for change? Do they perceive RBA as a possibility for structural change to make their lives better? This kind of research would seek to uncover similarities and differences between the way local Rwandans and rights-based NGOs and practitioners are thinking and acting, and could have the aim to come up with context-based solutions to structural problems.

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Interviews May-July 2005 and other documents

Interviews with representatives for CAURWA and one of their international partners in July 2005.

Conversation with Peter Uvin, Kigali, July 2005.

25 interviews with 17 rights-based practitioners in high or key positions in the organisations.

8 interviews with 8 local NGO representatives

8 observations of trainings, meetings, field trips.

About 20 additional interviews with international and local NGO representatives and journalists.

Internal BONA-document: Authors archive.

Civic education training manual: Author’s archive

Appendix 1 – Interview Guides

The interview guides to international and local NGOs are listed below. I have edited the guides as little as possible so that the reader can see them as they were used by me in Rwanda. The guides were used as a base or a backup, so as to guide me rather than as a questionnare. Thus, the questions were not put in the same way, and all the questions were not put to all the interviewees. Most importantly, the interviews were often very context-specific, meaning that it could be less about the more general questions in the guides and more about a specific project, partner or event.

Interview guide, international rights-based NGOs.

Name…
Title…
Has been working in this position since…
Other work experience (short)?
Other RBA experience?

This organisation is funded by…

Can you describe how your organisation is using a RBA?
Can you describe how you are using a RBA?

When did you adopt this approach?
How did it happen? (Who's initiative was it?)

What is different compared to before you adopted the RBA?

What are the major difficulties with practicing a RBA?

How do you choose who to work together with?
What kind of projects or programmes do you have right now?
What kind of projects or programmes would you like to have?

Focus on one project / programme:
Why did you choose this specific project / programme?
How did you choose this partner, what was the procedure?
Why did you choose this format?
How is it going?

How often do you meet him/her/them/your counterpart?
What do you do when you meet?
Do you communicate in any other ways?
How?

How often?
Is your communication satisfactory?

What rights are most important to you?
What rights are worth sacrificing?
How do you work to give these prioritized rights to people?

How would you describe the poor's/locals' influence over your policies?

(In what way) Do you take into consideration the history of Rwanda in your work / organisation?
How do you relate to the ethnic groups in Rwanda today?

Can a RBA help in preventing future violence?

Is it (politically) difficult to work in Rwanda having a RBA?
Why?
How?

How do you look at the Rwandan government in their way of handling the issue of ethnicity and future peace?
How do you approach divisions in Rwanda when the Rwandan government has the approach: there are no divisions but there will be if you start talking about them?

Can a RBA be destructive to a country? (e.g. if needed: can it undermine the state, change the wrong power relations, be to interventionist?)
Why?
How?

What does a RBA mean for the administrative work in your organisation / for you?
Does a RBA change anything in the way you look at your own organisation (e.g. if needed: ensuring that HR are followed at your workplace)
What?
How?

In what way are you accountable?
To your partners and/or beneficiaries?
(To your donors?)

Interview guide, local NGOs

Name…
Title…
Has been working in this position since…
Other work experience (short)?
Other RBA experience?

This organisation is funded by…

Questions to ask:
Does your organisation have a RBA?

If yes:
Can you describe how your organisation is using a RBA?
Can you describe how you are using a RBA?

When did you adopt this approach?
How did it happen? (Who's initiative was it?)

What is different compared to before you adopted the RBA?

What are the major difficulties with practicing a RBA?

If no:
What do you know about a RBA?
Have you worked in any other organisation that has had a RBA?

To all, whether yes or no or maybe:
How would you describe the RBA used by your international NGO counterpart (use name)?
In what way does your counterpart's RBA affect your work?

How do you choose who to work together with?
What kind of projects or programmes do you have right now?
What kind of projects or programmes would you like to have?

When did you get this project / programme?
How did you get this project / programme?
How is it going?

Have you or are you working with any other organisation that has a RBA?
How do they differ from each other?
How are they similar?

How often do you meet him/her/them/your counterpart?
What do you do when you meet?
Do you communicate in any other ways?
How?
How often?
Is your communication satisfactory?

Do you feel your partner INGOs are accountable to you?
Do you feel they are encouraging you to hold them accountable?

How would you describe the poor's/locals' influence over your policies?

( )
What are the negative aspects of a RBA?
What are the positive aspects of a RBA?
Why haven't you adopted a RBA?
What is good with an RBA?
What could be better?

(In what way) Do you take into consideration the history of Rwanda in your work / organisation?
How do you relate to the ethnic groups in Rwanda today?

If the organisation has a RBA:
What rights are most important to you?
What rights are worth sacrificing?
How do you work to give these prioritized rights to people?
Can a RBA help in preventing future violence?

Is it (politically) difficult to work in Rwanda having a RBA?
Why?
How?

How do you look at the Rwandan government in their way of handling the issue of ethnicity and future peace?
How do you approach divisions in Rwanda when the Rwandan government has the approach: there are no divisions but there will be if you start talking about them

Can a RBA be destructive to a country? (e.g. if needed: can it undermine the state, change the wrong power relations, be to interventionist?)
Why?
How?

What does a RBA mean for the administrative work in your organisation / for you?
Does a RBA change anything in the way you look at your own organisation (e.g. if needed: ensuring that HR are followed at your workplace)
What?
How?

To all:
In what way are you accountable?
To your partners and/or beneficiaries?
(To your donors?)