

A Brief Analytical Report: How Far is the SHG Approach Rights Based?

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Introduction:

1. The concept of the SHG approach as analyzed here represents what is promoted by KNH and all the participants of the workshop, including an the Indian consultant and the web site maintained and supported by KNH. Accordingly, the SHG approach is basically a community development approach wherein the very poor members of a community are organized to form self help groups with a common objective of working together for their economic and social development and also for their overall community development. The SHG approach has defined objectives, features, structures and operational procedures, which we may refer to whenever necessary in this analytical report. It suffices to note at this juncture that the SHG approach is founded on the following two principles:
 - Every human being has tremendous potential in her/himself. This hidden potential in the poor can be unleashed if the right environment is provided.
 - As an individual, the poor are voiceless, powerless and vulnerable. By bringing them together as a homogenous collective, they have tremendous strength.
2. The rights-based approach is taken as a conceptual framework founded on human rights norms and standards at the national and international level defining why, to what end, how and by whom human development is pursued. RBA is also taken as strategic approach that combines practical actions in motion in the field of human rights, development and social activism aiming at the realization of development and human rights through changes in policies and laws, resource allocations, quality of institutions, attitudes and behaviors, data and monitoring, and participation.
3. The analysis of the SHG approach vis-à-vis RBA is done from the perspective of the main features of RBA. The analysis incorporates the observations of the participants in the discussion held on the issue and my reflections as triggered by the visit I made to two SHGs in Addis Ababa, during the workshop; and in learning about the approach from both primary and secondary sources.

Assessment of the SHG approach from an RBA Perspective:

1. ***SHG approach is rights based as it concerns conceptualizing poverty and development:*** The SHG approach is based on the understanding of poverty not just as material deprivation but a continuous process of “dis-empowerment” that includes denial of choices/rights/opportunities, discrimination, disparity, domination, displacement, and de-humanization. This is consistent with the conceptualization of poverty from a human rights perspective. From a human rights perspectives poverty is not merely a state of low income but a human condition caused by deprivation of the capabilities, choice and power necessary for the enjoyment of fundamental rights. SHG’s understanding of development may not be explicitly stated. Yet, it is implied in the approach that development is transformation of people into agents of their own development, about building peoples own initiatives, and about addressing the injustice behind the exclusion deprivation, and disempowerment of the poor. Besides, conforming to the features of RBA, the SHG approach reflects the belief that the poor, who are voiceless, powerless and vulnerable, as individuals and as communities, are the key stakeholders in their own development.
2. ***The SHG approach is based on human rights values and principles which are at the core of RBA:*** As stated above, RBA is informed by human rights principles and values drawn from the international and national human rights apparatus. These values and principles include among other things, inherent dignity of human beings, equality and non-discrimination, indivisibility and interdependence of human rights, participation and empowerment, and accountability. The SHG approach, if not explicitly, reflects the prominence of most of these fundamental human rights principles. For example: The principle of the interdependence and indivisibility of human rights is reflected, by SHG when it adopts the objectives of economic, social and political empowerment. The social empowerment objective has in turn elements of equality and non-discrimination while the political empowerment objective constitutes participation. Moreover, equality and non-discrimination are reflected in SHG’s focus on the voiceless and the most marginalized, in considering the gender dimension of poverty, in the incorporation of rotational leadership and other operational procedures, etc. SHG is also building on the value of human agency when it considered the notion that “Every human being has tremendous potential in her/himself”.
3. ***The SHG approach employs participatory and empowering processes.*** One other distinct feature of RBA is its prescription of participatory and empowering development policy-making, planning, implementation, and evaluation processes, a feature drawn from human rights norms and standards. The SHG approach is commendably participatory and empowering: it is envisaged as a process of economic, social and political empowerment by the participation of the people involved; it underscores participation: by making participation in meetings mandatory and suggesting homogeneity of members, by promoting shared responsibility and leadership, by using tools such as PRA; it contributes to the establishment and strengthening of civil society institutions(SHG-CLA-Federation), etc. Notwithstanding, it is fair to say that the use of human rights

education as a means of empowerment and participation as a fundamental right are not clearly addressed in the SHG approach and its implementation.

4. ***The SHG approach espouses accountability, with much more focus on internal accountability.*** RBA is a strategic framework that also promotes accountability actions. In that respect, RBA goes beyond ownership of development processes and internal accountability among right holders. It invokes the accountability of duty bearers to respect, protect and fulfill rights. SHG inherently lay down the basis for internal accountability through ownership of structures and processes and hierarchy between the group, community level associations, and federations of self-help groups. Yet, as it concerns accountability actions directed towards external actors, the job seems to be left out for CLAs and Federation of SHGs. As a result, it seems at this point in time that the SHG approach focuses on internal accountability without making any effort to demand the accountability of external actors who are either moral or legal duty bearers to respect, protect and fulfill the rights of members of self-help groups. Concomitant to the demand for accountability is the entitlement, and responsibility, of the members of SHGs to demand accountability to rights at the household, community, local and national level and based not only in relation to human rights norms and standards but also by invoking customary and living law.
5. ***SHG promotes integrated and multi-level interventions to address the multi-faceted poverty reduction process.*** As briefly mentioned in relation to the recognition of the principle of the interdependence of human rights in the SHG approach, the design of the SHG approach incorporates an integrated approach. SHG has also considered the need for multi-level intervention by initiating multi-level institutional arrangements, SHG, CLA and Federation of SHGs. These are within the ambit of RBA, so long as economic factors are addressed to strengthen social and political and other factors behind the perpetuation of poverty, and in so far as the micro-level intervention and changes are supported by macro level interventions and changes. These are not clear in the SHG approach, as they should be.
6. ***The practical implementation of SHG and the early stages overemphasize the economic empowerment perspective.*** Even though SHG is concerned about addressing the root causes of poverty, exclusion and dis-empowerment, the practical implementation tend to emphasize economic concerns, in effect making social and political empowerment side issues. From the perspective of RBA, the economic, resource building, income generation, saving and investing activities are entry points to initiate an entirely empowering process that encompasses influencing decision making, resource allocation and development policies hindering the realization of economic, social, civil and political rights.
7. ***How ever similar and linked SHG and RBA appear from the above, it is evident that the SHG approach does not explicitly use or make reference to human rights instruments and the overall human rights framework.*** It is only by implication and critical analysis that we can draw the link between SHG and RBA. Moreover, it is obvious that SHG goals are not articulated in relation to realization of human rights, nor are human rights referred to as a means to realize development goals

Recommendation:

1. ***Considering conscious linkages to human rights norms and principles:*** This refers directly to the shortcoming of SHG mentioned above under the seventh point. The human rights framework provides a host of values and principles that are drawn from the inherent dignity of the human person and that enables us to better understand the root causes of poverty. Besides, the rights based approach has added values that legitimize promoting non-discrimination, accountability, empowerment and participation in the poverty reduction and development process.
2. ***Including rights based analysis to understand the context of intervention and have base line information:*** The basis for measuring how far SHG is RBA needs to be linked to having a pre-intervention rights based analysis. The evaluation would then be to what extent there are changes brought by the SHG intervention. Definitely, the changes envisaged need to relate to the capacity of rights holders to claim their rights, and of duty-bearers to fulfill their obligations.
3. ***Initiating and Strengthening activities aiming at accountability of duty bearers:*** As pointed out above SHG has done little in invoking accountability of duty bearers.
4. ***Linking empowerment and the empowering function of knowledge about human rights:*** it is proven that knowledge about human rights is by itself empowering, particularly to the poor and the marginalized people. Hence, it is recommended that facilitators of the SHG approach need to have human rights training and the SHG process need to consider human rights education as part of its capacity building initiatives.
5. ***Exploring the world wide women's movement and incorporating its findings to the SHG approach.*** Whereas the beneficiaries of SHG are largely women, there is no direct reference to gender analysis, empowerment and equality in any of the SHG approach. And in the wider world, , the women's movement has done a lot in linking rights and the social, economic, and political empowerment of the poor women. It is recommended that these developments and experiences need to be explored and incorporated in the SHG approach. s far as RBA is concerned