

H2N – Human Rights and Communication

The FCHR unit elaborated this how-to note (H2N) for internal capacity building purposes. The note is based on the [SDC Guidance on Human Rights \(2019\)](#). The purpose of this document is to provide SDC staff with guidance on effective and conflict-sensitive communication on human rights as part of the human rights-based approach. This document complements the H2N of the FCHR unit on human rights in policy dialogue.

Effective communication on human rights

The [FDFA Guidelines on Human Rights 2021-24](#) emphasizes that “*effective and sustainable development cannot occur without the promotion of human rights*” (see chapter 4.4. sustainability). Recognising this, the [SDC Guidance on Human Rights \(2019\)](#) contributes to the concrete implementation of the FDFA Guidance’s thematic pillar human rights and sustainability.

SDC operationalises human rights in sustainable development through a human rights based approach (HRBA)¹. This requires clear, effective and conflict-sensitive communication. Communication on human rights (HR) in development cooperation starts from the premise that communication is both a human right in itself² and essential to empowering rights-holders, thereby delivering optimum, sustainable development results.

Effective communication on human rights requires us to:

1. Accurately reflect the **relevant international human rights standards and identify rights-holders and duty-bearers** relevant to the development sector / thematic priority of each programme.

Rights-holders: all human beings (not only citizens) are “holders” of human rights, individually and in certain contexts as groups. The HRBA addresses them not just as beneficiaries of development cooperation, but as recipients of services that are theirs – as of right. As a matter of international law, states are the primary legal *duty-bearers* with the duty to respect, protect and fulfil human rights (including where they delegate authority through decentralisation or privatisation³). Other actors such as intergovernmental organisations, transnational corporations and non-state armed groups are also human rights duty-bearers, bound by a range of legal obligations.⁴

2. **Empower and enhance participation of our target groups**, by explicitly referring and raising awareness of the universally agreed HR standards relevant to our development sector/thematic priority and the profile of the target group.⁵ Related to this, it is important to keep in mind that **those whose rights are not respected** often have a **vital interest that we communicate effectively and explicitly** on human rights.

¹ Applying an HRBA means basing development on the rights and duties of the international human rights framework, ensuring that our interventions strengthen duty bearers to promote, protect and fulfil rights and that rights holders are empowered to (know and) claim their rights (e.g. access to clean water, to food, to political participation). Key principles guiding all interventions are based on the international HR framework: non-discrimination, empowered participation, transparency and accountability.

² Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression: this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers”).

³ E.g. the CESCR [Committee General Comment No. 24](#) (2017) provides important clarification on states’ obligations in the context of growing impact of business activities on the enjoyment of ESC rights.

⁴ See more in SDC Guidance on Human Rights (2019), p.9

⁵ Migrants, refugees, internally displaced persons etc have many human rights in common, but accurate language highlights specific rights based on their migration status, and other rights as women, children, PWD etc.

3. **Emphasize that a human rights-based approach is part of our accountability, for how we do things and what we achieve** in development cooperation. [Communicate on / explicitly link our development work to Switzerland's global human rights commitments. For example, prioritising and including people with disabilities in development cooperation is part of Switzerland's commitments under the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).
4. **Emphasize the universality**, indivisibility, interrelatedness; interdependence **and binding nature** of human rights, including the prohibited grounds of discrimination.⁶
5. **Emphasize sustainability** benefits of human rights-based development, eg. strengthening human rights means addressing root causes of conflict and poverty. HRBA strengthens rule of law, which is essential for economic and social development and contributes to peace by building trust between state and society.⁷
6. **Cover the whole spectrum of rights (economic, social and cultural rights, as well as civil and political rights)**. A common misperception is that human rights are confined to justice, governance and the democratic functioning of a state. The fact that human rights cover the whole spectrum of people's lives, eg. not only the political sphere, but also health, education, water, food, livelihoods, decent work, etc. (ie economic, social and cultural human rights⁸) is often not on development professionals' 'radar'. Understanding and communicating the comprehensive reach of human rights can be transformative of the daily lives of our target groups.
7. **'Normalise' communication on human rights and ensure visibility of HR content** in all sectors we work in. Explicit reference to the applicable international human rights treaties and standards provides clarity and orientation where we want and are required to go. For example: *Education: be explicit in your communication regarding the full content of the right to education.*⁹ *Employment and income: communicate and work towards international standards on the right to "decent work";*¹⁰ *basic services: communicate that basic public services are not just development needs, but are human rights.*¹¹
8. **Embrace positivity / Cultivate narratives that are beneficial to human rights** and the people who defend them (eg. human rights defenders). Showcase the impact achieved and improvements delivered when people promote human rights¹².

Conflict sensitive communication on human rights¹³

Effective communication on human rights is by definition conflict-sensitive, which means:

1. **Do no harm:** Sensitivity to the consequences of communication choices is key to avoid exacerbating tensions between different groups and inflaming different forms of conflicts. Communicating development needs/problems as "human rights" (as opposed to a charity-based approach) avoids diluting human rights law obligations and disempowering rights-holders.

⁶ The effective exercise of many civil and political rights are dependent on socio-economic rights being guaranteed (education, housing, decent work etc)

⁷ This logic is also reflected in human rights as a theory of change: Strengthening **capacity, efficiency, transparency and accountability** of duty-bearing institutions, enhances rights-holders' **trust** in key institutions. This increases the likelihood that people will access these institutions to claim their rights and **resolve disputes non-violently**, rather than taking the law into their own hands or resorting to violence. (SDC HR narrative, 2021)

⁸ See [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#).

⁹ [General Comment No. 13: The right to education \(1999\)](#)

¹⁰ [ILO, Decent work for sustainable development \(DW4SD\) Resource Platform \(Working Conditions\)](#).

¹¹ [Report of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights on the role of the public service as an essential component of good governance in the promotion and protection of human rights](#) (2013)

¹² For a more thorough study on this subject: <https://ishr.ch/defenders-toolbox/resources/new-narratives-a-seat-at-the-table/>

¹³ See also: FCHR H2N Conflict Sensitivity and Communication / Policy Dialogue (2021)



2. **Normalising human rights language and dialogue** is also key to legitimizing and protecting Human Rights Defenders, reinforcing efforts of local human rights CSOs and others to advance human rights dialogue in the country.¹⁴ Furthermore, conflict-sensitive communication is also important for the security of our staff in partner countries.¹⁵
3. **Empower but not expose:** communicating with / raising awareness of vulnerable groups on their rights is integral part of the HRBA. Key is to empower but not expose beneficiaries. This means supporting them to find their own strategies to claim their rights, and to take informed risks in asserting their rights.
4. **Take a step by step approach:** In some contexts, adopting human rights language may be advanced by a 'step by step' approach, Making connections between international human rights law standards and local cultural/religious norms, (eg traditions of caring for the disadvantaged, hosting strangers etc), which may offer a more familiar, entry point. Addressing issues affecting men and women, boys and girls may be a step towards more comprehensive gender critique, addressing FGM, sexual orientation etc. Linking programming to a right to health or education etc in a national Constitution may resonate more than just focusing on the Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights etc. However, the ultimate aim is always to advance towards development communication that explicitly and accurately addresses human rights and acknowledges their universal legal status.

FCHR Unit, Bern, August 2021

For more resources on human rights and communication:

- [10 keys to effectively communicate human rights- European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights](#)
- [ISHR toolbox](#)

¹⁴ [Swiss Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders \(2019\)](#)

¹⁵ See also: FCHR H2N Conflict Sensitivity & Security Management (2021)