



CID Talk, Anne-Marie Brook

Co-founder and Development Lead, Human Rights Development Initiative

Measuring Human Rights

Thursday 7th June, 2018

Anne-Marie's talk was a vision of human rights in the data age, where the national and global performance of countries on their human rights commitments can be more transparent than ever with the Human Rights Measurement Initiative (HRMI).

HRMI is a global collaborative project that Anne-Marie co-founded and is currently leading at Motu in Wellington, New Zealand – an economic think-tank that ranks in the global top 10. Drawing on a robust collection and analysis process, Anne-Marie and the HRMI propose a reinvention of the way human rights can be understood and drawn on to drive more ethical behaviour by states and other actors.

Developing as a response to the isolation of the rights framework to law and principle, Anne-Marie explains the vision of the HRMI is as 'platform': a tangible means for collaboration across a broad range of organisations, including but not limited to development and human rights NGOs, inter-governmental organisations, in-country human rights experts, other civil society organisations, private sector and journalists. Although human rights have been long agreed to globally – Anne-Marie estimated some 170 out of 200 countries have ratified the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (UNDHR) since its inception in December 1948 - there has been no way to measure and define their progress and effect in practical reality. Anne-Marie suggests this significantly affects the weighting of human rights as real, inviolable entitlements that each and every person can expect, quoting John Hayes: 'We tend to overvalue the things we can measure and undervalue the things we cannot'. The pervasiveness of and attention paid to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is an example of this.

The HRMI methodology, then, is to produce useful, nuanced analyses of the actual performance of human rights country to country, based on data provided by in-country experts and condensed by human rights academics in to meaningful form. Currently in its pilot stage, the HRMI comprises data of 13 self-nominated countries who responded to a global call for participation. Anne-Marie explained that this avoided selection bias and has allowed a diversity enough to allow significant comparisons between nations. She also noted that the collection method bypasses the issue of non-objective sources of data, with an encrypted, single-response link sent to 20-50 people in each country verifiably able to establish a comprehensive local picture of human rights enactment. This was aggregated using a Bayesian statistical model which Anne-Marie clarifies as particularly useful for this context in expressing an 'honest display' of uncertainty.

Presently, the focus is on 12 human rights, broadly fitting under 2 categories undergirded by international covenant: Economic, Social, and Cultural rights, and Civil and Political rights.

Anne-Marie explained a key aspect of the HRMI model is factoring 'progressive realisation': expressing a country's human rights performance in terms of its economic and structural capacity to deliver. Anne-Marie demonstrated how this approach – outcome as a function of potential – situates data with the HRMI Achievement Possibilities Frontier (APF), using the example of the right to food.



Here, the indicator used of a country's performance is the percentage of children under 5 who are not stunted (something caused by choleric and nutrient insufficiency). The APF is visualised in a line on a scatter plot of real data from countries measuring the proportion of children stunted to what country should be able to provide based on GDP per capita (percent not stunted by GDP per capita). What's important about this is that countries which closely fit the APF are recognised as high achieving – even if they appear to perform poorly on an aggregate level.

All the current HRMI data is on the HRMI website, under 'explore our data page'. This is set up to communicate data by geography using radar charts.

Some guidance Anne-Marie offers on understanding the charts:

- The further out from centre a country is across the 12 rights, the better it is performing
- Green is the colour key for economic and social rights
- Blue is the colour key for civil and political rights
- Anything less than 100% is a fail grade. Remember, the comparison is relative to other countries with similar levels of GDP per capita - so 100% means meeting expectations of what is shown as possible to achieve given GDP per capita.
- There are two levels of comparison. Therefore it is important to exercise care in interpreting data – when evaluated in terms of the high income standards (more ideal) there can be significant changes in performance.
- Rights can be isolated and compared across countries
- The height of bars in cross-country comparisons varies according to uncertainty, communicating the agreement level of experts from the same country on the performance of different rights.
- Usefulness of uncertainty bands – can aid in comparison between countries (overlap)
- It is possible to examine the dispersion of rights fulfilment across micro-population categories, which provides a nuanced picture than aggregate measures. Here, the equity is measured out 10.
- The collection method means it is also possible to refine in to groups most at risk as identified by experts

Question time emphasised what Anne-Marie openly acknowledges: the need for greater scope in data collection and for wider country involvement. Key points were around measuring non-citizen population access to rights (e.g. refugees), the challenges for small countries in formalising useful data for indicators, and ensuring quality of data. Anne-Marie summarised other feedback she's had as concerning interpretability (where results of 100% are by no means the concrete ideal) and detail in disaggregating data.

Even as it is in its current stages, the HRMI is revolutionary. Its potential as an 'impact currency' for all manner of organisations concerned, even obliquely, with human rights is clearly immense. Human rights is the theoretical fundament of human activity, but it is meaningless without practical valuation. Thus, HRMI is an explosive new way to understand and implement positive impacts.

For more details, please view Anne-Marie's presentation [here](#) and follow the conversation in upcoming CID Weekly newsletters.