Urban Jonsson writes:

This is in response to Geoffrey Cannon’s What do you think? June WN column (1), and to Claudio Schuftan’s letter in the same issue (2).

Equality is a human rights principle and is scientifically defined as ‘the same’. Equity is a justice concept, meaning ‘fairness’. This is where the ambiguity of the term ‘equity’ becomes obvious. Originally a law concept, created exactly to allow judges that particular ambiguity, ‘equity’ has now been adopted in development discussions, which raises the question of ‘fair according to whom?’

‘Equity’ is not even mentioned in either the UN Charter or the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. There is no single definition of ‘equity’. Any interpretation reflects a value judgment. The difference between ‘equality’ and ‘equity’ is illustrated by the following example. Two people doing the same job with the same result should have equal pay, while people doing different jobs, requiring very different skills, should have different amounts of pay in the name of fairness – which is to say, an equitable pay. While in the first case a scientific comparison can be done, that is not possible in the second case. There is no scientific way to assess ‘fairness’, because it is based on a judgment.
Aspirational goals are valuable

A common misconception about ‘equality’ is the perception that just because equality can never fully be achieved, it is not a useful concept in development planning and practice. However, development, democracy, justice, freedoms and human rights are all equally important, but also share another characteristic – they all represent unachievable goals in practice! But that does not mean that these aspirations are not in one way or another guiding most people and countries in their development efforts. Few would claim that we should give up the idea of democracy just because of the fact that no country has achieved or is likely to ever achieve complete democracy.

Finally, a new way of thinking about ‘equity’ and ‘equality’ would be to interpret these two concepts within the reconstruction of ‘development’ in the Outcome and the Process dimensions, which allows for the definition of four types of uses, namely (1) equity of the process; (2) equity of the outcome; (3) equality of the process; and (4) equality of the outcome.

Thus Affirmative Action, a concept often used in efforts to achieve gender equality in outcomes, for example improved gender balance in high-level jobs like physicians or judges, by giving women advantages (positive discrimination) in the selection of students in medicine or law. Such ‘affirmative action’ would then mean the use of an equitable (morally defendable un-equal) process to achieve equality in outcomes.

A rather dramatic example is shown above, used by some of those affected by the current ‘equity hysteria’. The two pictures show a situation where three children of

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different ages and different heights are trying to watch a cricket match. The title of the show, as you see, is ‘Equality vs. Equity’, with the first picture reflecting ‘equality’ and the second one reflecting ‘equity’. From this simplistic comparison, most would agree that the right picture labelled ‘equity’ is a much better choice than the left picture labeled ‘equality’. The problem, however, is that a large number of people in development are trying to make that choice permanent – equity should be used – not equality!

**Either-or, or else both-and**

The show above is a typical example of the reduction of a two-dimensional problem or situation is reduced to a one-dimensional one. Each of the pictures actually reflect two dimensions of the situation. One is the way the three children are positioned behind the wall (the process). The other is the actual amount each can see (the desirable outcome). The first picture illustrates a situation where an equal process of positioning the children results in a great in-equality of the outcome. The second picture illustrates a situation an equitable process of positioning the children results in an equal outcome. All would agree that the second picture represents the desirable choice between the two. This picture reflects the earlier Affirmative Action where a morally acceptable in-equality or equity results in equality of the outcomes.

With these new definitions, both equality and equity are important in development, but should each be applied where and when each of them is the appropriate choice, based on their different meanings in different contexts. For example, while equality plays an important role in a human right-based approach, equity is also often required in the process of development (affirmative action) in order to progressively achieve equal results.

**Justice and human rights**

In conclusion, it is not either equity or equality – It is both! Or as reflected in the Introduction of the *Universal Declaration of human Rights*, it is not either justice or human rights – It is both!

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As a footnote, it is interesting to know that in one of the richest and most equal countries in the world, Sweden, the country of which I am a citizen, the late Prime Minister Olof Palme, the key actor in the creation of the Swedish welfare state,
always emphasised that development should always give equal emphasis on ‘justice and equality’ (Rättvisa och Jämlikhet)

References


Further reading

- Jones H. Equity in development. Why it is important and how to achieve it. ODI working paper 2009.
- International Women’s Rights Action Watch. Equity or equality for women? Understanding CEDAW’s equality principles. Asia Pacific Occasional Paper Series 2009, 14

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How to respond

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