



DIGNITY in Practice:

an attempt to define and operationalize a complex construct

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Credit to: Calvin Ochieng / The Dignity Project:
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Introduction

Across the development sector—from the global to the local—there is broad rhetorical consensus that upholding and enhancing dignity is the right thing to do in designing, delivering, and seeking donations for aid. Dignity underlies the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, features in NGO names and mission statements, and is part of 152 national constitutions ([Wein, 2022](#)).

Dignity has intrinsic value; it is important in its own right and valued by many around the world, so we should be respectful of people’s dignity for its own sake. In addition, treating people in a way commensurate with their dignity has instrumental value, with the potential to advance many other outcomes we care about in aid and development.

Despite its importance, there is still little practical agreement on how to define dignity and how to operationalize this construct. Without these components on how to define and operationalize dignity, as well as a more nuanced understanding of how to incentivize and cherish approaches and behavior that respect people’s dignity, we remain in a world of rhetoric rather than action.

In this document, we build on our [longer working paper](#) to attempt to define dignity and introduce the dignity chain as a first, visual operationalization of this construct in the international development sector.



Defining DIGNITY

Dignity is “a trait universal to all humans, which is inalienable, inherent, and unearned. Recognising the dignity of a person requires us to treat them in a way that respects their dignity. When we fail to show that respect for dignity, the disrespected individual can appeal to the wider society for redress.”

Operationalizing DIGNITY

The dignity chain illustrates entry points for respect for dignity across the various stakeholders in the development sector. It shows how we must move beyond good intentions in fundraising, design and delivery of aid programs, and understand the actual dignity experiences of those who development seeks to serve, when they access aid, and the consequences of those experiences.

1. DIGNITY is a trait universal to all humans - inalienable, inherent, and unearned.

Dignity, we say in the paper, is “a trait universal to all humans, which is inalienable, inherent, and unearned. Recognising the dignity of a person requires us to treat them in a way that respects their dignity. When we fail to show that respect for dignity, the disrespected individual can appeal to the wider society for redress.”

We call this our ‘workhorse’ definition - it’s not perfect, but we think it is practical. There are a lot of concepts packed into that definition; let’s unpack them.

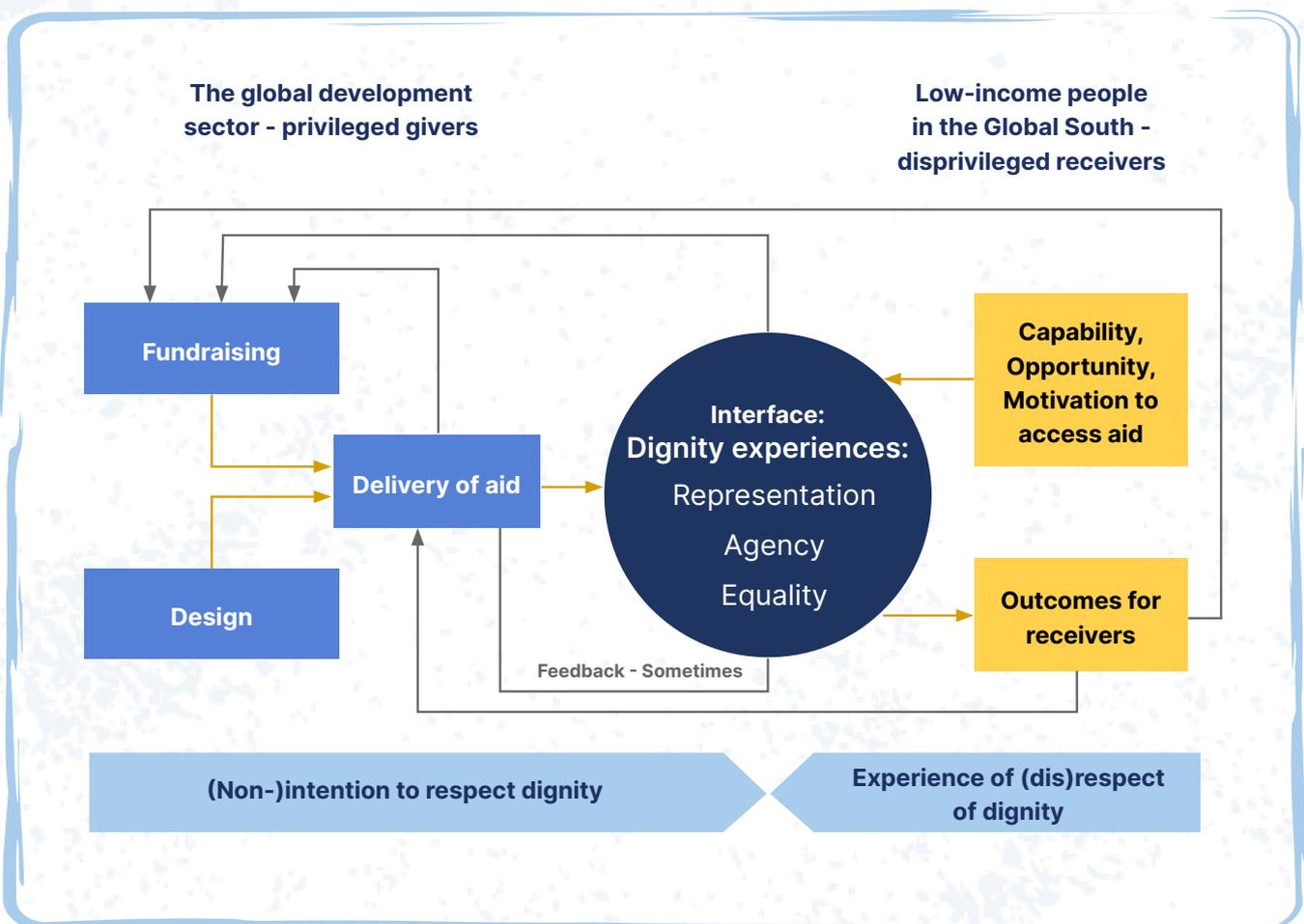
We assert in our definition that everyone has dignity, no matter who they are or what they do. Their dignity cannot be stripped away by another or by their conditions, nor can they earn more dignity through their choices. In fact, it does not really make sense to say that any person has a quantity of dignity - they just have dignity as a trait.

This aligns with the ‘moralized’ tradition of dignity and contrasts with the ‘merit’ tradition, in which people only have dignity if they achieve a certain rank or behave in a certain way (Debes, 2017). We promote this moralized idea of dignity as it aligns well with universality and the moral urgency that lie at the heart of development efforts.

This fact about people - that they have dignity - has consequences. It means they must be treated in a certain way. They must be treated in a way that respects their dignity. Different cultures, people and situations will imply different ways of showing that respect - and ultimately the individual is the subjective arbiter of whether they have been treated in the way they would hope. If they have not been, they rightly can appeal to others in society to help them secure redress. That said, we see representation, agency and equality recur in many traditions as important ways in which people say they would like to be treated.

2. The dignity chain illustrates entry points for respect for dignity across the various stakeholders in the development sector.

We propose the 'dignity chain' framework to illustrate flows in the global aid system, including of money and people, goods and services, ideas and images, as well as intentions and experiences. At each node (shape) and link (arrow) in the chain, there is potential to improve or worsen the dignity experiences of the people involved in the chain. This helps show how the philosophical points we describe above exist in the real world of development.



More than good intentions

What constitutes behavior respectful of people's dignity will differ by culture, situational context, and even by person (Leung & Cohen, 2011; Holloway, 2019). The intention of one person or organization to be respectful of another's dignity may not always be experienced as such by those around them. For this reason, we separate out 'intent-to-respect' from 'experienced-respect.' At any link in the dignity chain, there is the potential for the experience to be respectful or disrespectful of people's dignity. There is also the potential for stated and actual intentions to be out-of-sync with experiences. Though this can happen at any link, a key fault line with the potential for disconnect is the meeting between privileged givers and disprivileged receivers, which we show in gray arrows.

On the 'giving' side, respect for dignity enters through professionals' choice regarding how to fund, design, and deliver aid programs

For the international development sector to 'work', development professionals need to make choices about how to fund, design, and deliver aid programs.

- **Fundraising:** Money is power. Institutional - and to a smaller extent or indirectly individual - funders often still dictate development priorities and processes. Institutional donors include governments and their bilateral aid agencies, multilateral entities, and private foundations. Individual donors include charitable givers (active) and philanthropists as well as taxpayers (passive). Also included in this node are the people and processes that raise and direct funds, including the materials, data, and images they use to do so.
- **Design:** Think of the role of policies, plans, and programs in determining what may be provided to whom, when, and how (Lasswell, 1936). This includes the people, bureaucratic processes, and various types of politics that determine the cash and in-kind goods and services that may be delivered. At present, and despite growing efforts to co-create services, the people involved in these processes are likely to be more senior and located in global capitals.
- **Delivery:** Flowing from the combination of dollars and design is the delivery pathway, from headquarters-based operations folks out (and often down) to frontline workers. Along this strand of the chain are those people and processes that turn plans into tangible actions and outputs. These actions and outputs, which may be captured in various metrics and images, may feed back into fundraising efforts

Disprivileged receivers' experiences matter

On the other side of the diagram we represent those who development seeks to serve. They may access aid - and when they do so, they experience consequences of doing so.

- Accessing aid: People are targeted by different aid efforts. Yet the offered aid may be neither easy nor desirable to access. We represent this as the intended receiver's capability, opportunity, and or motivation to take up the offered aid, as well as the actions/behavior required to access aid (Michie et al., 2011).
- Consequences of attempting to access aid: The outcomes for receivers of aid might be economic, social, physiological, psychological, and so on. We emphasize the full range of real and felt outcomes of receivers over intended outcomes of development professionals.

The interface: where intentions (of givers) meet felt experience (of receivers)

We define the interface as the main point at which givers and receivers interact, in some handover of cash, goods, and/or services. In human terms, this is where aid employees and volunteers physically interact with those their whole enterprise intended to benefit. It is where the rubber hits the road. Who is on both sides of this interaction, their histories, cultures and incentives, may matter a great deal in determining the quality of the interaction. Since one side, the aid-givers, have greater resources and power, and have funded, designed and delivered this interaction, it is their duty to ensure that this interaction happens in the right way. The consequences of decisions made across the chain are realized at this point, in the context of past experiences and expectations, in the operation upon the lives and experiences of those who seek to receive aid.

Three pathways to (dis)respecting the dignity of others

The interactions at the interface - and any interaction at either of the nodes in the dignity chain - are guided by three pathways to showing respect: representation, agency and equality. We are not sure if they are universal, but our research has shown that they recur in many philosophical and popular traditions of dignity across the world. We articulate each in the context of global aid, though they operate in many contexts.

- **Representation** refers to any person lower in a hierarchy seeing themselves in the levels above and, in turn, of that person 'feeling seen.' In the aid sector, this might include frontline workers in relationship to senior leaders, as well as aid-seekers in relationship to the frontline workers with whom they interact. The pursuit of more representation may include diversified staffing in aid programming and efforts to make this meaningfully visible; appointing and honoring community advisory boards; tailoring 'best practice' to specific contexts and needs (Redfern et al., 2021); taking care to address aid-seekers by their preferred names and speaking politely; and engaging with relevant cultural traditions and rituals.
- **Agency** refers to having relevant choices, a meaningful chance to consent, and ultimately to have decision-authority over choices that are relevant to you. In the aid sector, this might include communities (broadly defined) determining the design and delivery of aid-enabled goods and services. This might encompass (compensated) co-design of selection processes and services offered and allowing intended targets to choose if, when, and how to engage with goods and services and to provide feedback on these experiences.
- **Equality** refers to the treatment of those in different places in a hierarchy in accordance with their equal moral status as givers. In the aid system, this means actualizing the equal moral status—as knowers and doers—of givers and intended receivers. This might encompass systemic changes to the balances of power in aid, as well as alterations such as encouraging polite interactions and swiftly dealing with cases where an aid-seeker was maltreated.

The possible feedback pathway

Feedback, when systematically gathered and thoughtfully acted upon, can serve the goals of honoring dignity in development. There are high hopes for mechanisms of feedback, listening, participation, and redress (Mansuri & Rao 2012; Anderson et al., 2012) - so long as time, resources, and decision-spaces (Bossert, 1998) are held open for feedback to shape the direction of materials, programming, and policies.

We highlight two places where feedback can play an important role in respecting dignity. First, lessons from the aid interface—aneccdotally or systematically—can filter back into donation-seeking and design, for better and for worse. Second, we highlight the potential information flow between outcomes of trying to access aid and the donation-seeking, design, and delivery of aid. It is in this process that IDinsight tries to have impact.

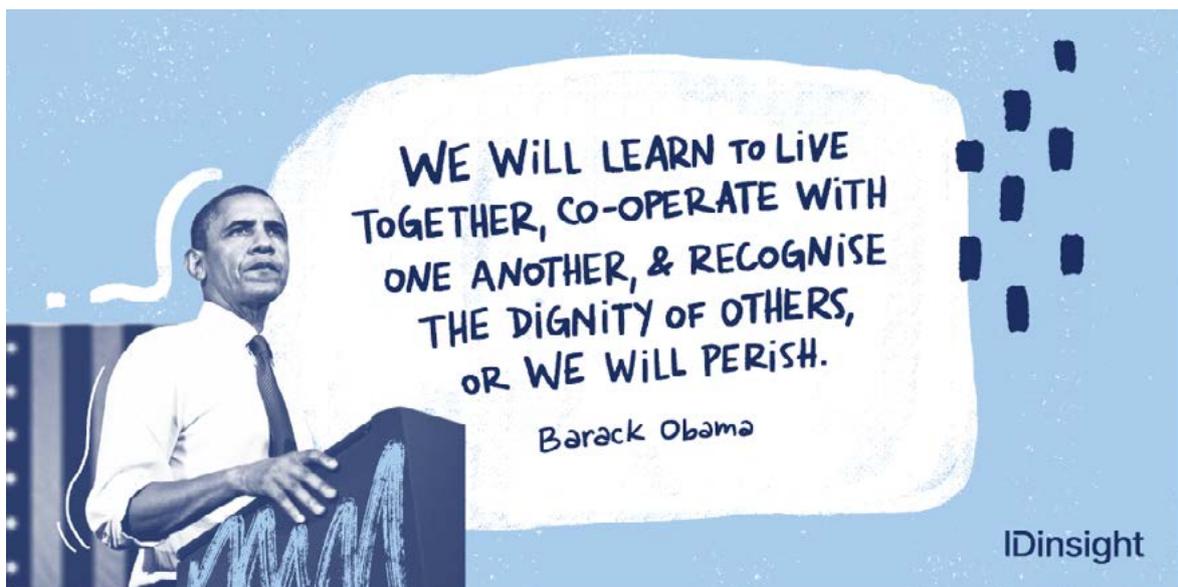


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Conclusion

Dignity matters for its own sake. It is something many in the development sector value, and more importantly it is valued by many of those development seeks to serve. Treating people in the right way has other positive consequences too. So we must uphold the promise we make to respect dignity in the work of development. To do so, we must begin with clarity about what we mean, and about how (dis)respect appears in our sector.

These concepts provide a foundation for all the work done by IDinsight's Dignity Initiative. We hope you find the paper useful. Soon we'll publish more about the research agenda that proceeds from these ideas.



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