Evolutionary synthesis of human rights and global health: beyond companionship

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Lawrence O. Gostin and Benjamin Mason Meier’s “Human Rights in Global Health: Rights-Based Governance for a Globalizing World” (2018) has made a great hit and collectors’ favorite in the global health community by featuring the value of various types of international legal frameworks and rights-based approaches in global health. Their latest book, “Foundations of Global Health & Human Rights” (2020), nicely interweaves and then amalgamates these 2 disciplines of global health and human rights into a completely matured architecture. The authors assemble experts from law, public health, and human rights for unity in seemingly unconnected multiple fundamental themes from intellectual human rights conceptual development scholarship to the long history of struggles to prevent repetition of tragedies of human rights violations; to the histories of quests with triumphs to expand the legal framework to keep human dignity, life, and health as human rights; and to various innovative mechanisms to protect the human right to health amid conflict between entrepreneurial industry’s interests in free global trade and the protection of population’s health through regulation. They also introduce different pathogens and unseen or underutilized new potential treatments of choice (human right to health based approach), which can be found useful by both global health and human right communities; activists and scholars; general public and experts; duty-bearers and right-holders; and state actors and non-state actors.

This new book is a splendid source of previously untold stories and insightful perspectives on protecting people’s rights and the right to health from various types of violence committed regretfully by the same species–human–with institutional power arrangement. It also presents a comprehensive account institutionalizing history of the human right to health and global health agenda via both legal and historical perspectives. Examples include the freedom declaration for slaves in Babylon (539 BCE); the 1215 Magna Carta; the 1848 Revolution Spirit in Paris; Nuremberg Code to prevent historical repeat following atrocities of World War II, as a series of human rights basis toward conforming to and adjudicating the Universal Declaration of Human Right (1948); 2 separate human rights covenants related to Cold War, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights; contributions of the Cairo and Beijing Conferences; the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child; HIV/AIDS activism and movements to further human rights norms; and the historical achievements of legal frameworks protecting human rights in the era of globalization by adhering to welfare maximization in the legal discourse of international commercial trade per se. At the same time, it offers a unique
opportunity to ponder ongoing global health matters and initiatives through a human rights lens and examine how human rights norms and principles have been put into the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

This book is divided into 4 parts with 20 chapters:

Section I (Norms and Principles) provides concept development and philosophy.

Section II (Implementation and Accountability) introduces the arena of human rights.

Section III (Contemporary Application) provides fresh and comprehensive perspectives on global health agenda using human rights perspectives and legal institutional arrangements. This section will serve as an idea box to global health field experts who may have felt some limit to proceed in their work, especially to those who stand on more or less technical, behavioral, and social expertise.

Section IV (New Challenges) introduces both challenges in global health and challenges in the application of human rights approaches to the issue elements as the problem grows quickly.

This book is not just for intellectual pleasure. The remarkable breadth of information and evolving ideation reminds readers of everyone’s responsibility to serve each other. By providing the dual value aspects of the current norm of the right to health, i.e., “a universal minimum standard irrespective of a nation’s available resources” and “the highest attainable standard of health depending on resource availability” the book eventually navigates the readers into the contemporary uncomfortable, dissatisfactory, populist, nationalistic situation in the world, which has wrought to dismantle historical achievements in human right to health. Based on humanistic optimism, however, the book editors and authors ask readers to take action together for improvement using their newly gained insight from the book.

Who would benefit most by reading this book?

Unlike many other books, I feel advanced career experts, who have worked in either global health or human rights or both for decades, would benefit most from this quality interdisciplinary book as it would help fill their intellectual as well as practical gap efficiently for maximally achieving their lifetime commitment goals. Early or mid-career experts in human rights and global health as well as those seeking these 2 agendas into one conceptual framework in their career would be able to prime their skills with similar maximal efficiency and comprehensiveness as well.

Other beneficiaries would include those observing diverse typology of human rights violations during the current ongoing coronavirus disease 2019 response, such as restriction of mobility, violation of privacy, ethnic discrimination by induced cleavage, and acute aggravation on chronic vulnerability in lower socioeconomic communities, and those doubting whether these pandemic responses are inevitable in nature or acceptable or not.

Additionally, it is a must-read book for highly scholarly academics who want to know the secret as to how seemingly rhetorical concept without any materialistic foundation like human rights have succeeded in achieving undeniable influence in the real world.

The book, however, does not offer a perfect solution to us regarding contradiction between population health versus tailored individual right to health with different needs; contradiction between nation-states’ responsibility as duty-bearers and prevailing human
rights violations by duty-bearers themselves; contradicting human rights indicators between useful accountability monitoring tools versus the risk of reductionism; duality of justiciability as pros and cons of litigation; and resource availability as a practical limit for hugely unmet need of human right to health.

When you meet this book, it will surprise you with its insights, although you are familiar with most of these topics. This book is not entirely unique, but during the reading, you will pass through diverse feelings such as anger, frustration, depression, desperation, sorrow, encouragement, excitement, communal spirit, hope, honor, patience, pleasure, sacrifice, admiration, ponderance, and companionship. Most importantly, you will find the book not difficult to read. I believe most readers will experience evolutionary growth while reading relaxed intellectually enjoying even within stormy venture.