

# Disrupting Rights: Putting people at the centre of change

“Where, after all, do human rights begin? In small places, close to home...”

Eleanor Roo



## Disrupting Rights

Putting people at the centre of change

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# Introduction

In 2005, the late trade unionist and human rights activist Inez McCormack gave a presentation on the 1948 Universal Declaration on Human Rights to a group of women from a neglected council estate in North Dublin. She referred to its *“recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world”*.

Inez stumbled over the phrase “inalienable rights”, the group laughed, and one woman asked what it meant. Inez explained that it meant that human rights were hers, everybody’s, by virtue of their very humanity.

**“Well!” the woman exclaimed.  
“That’s the f\*\*\*\*\* best-kept secret in the world!”**

## **It is no surprise that rights are foreign concepts in the very communities that most need their transformative potential.**

Despite Eleanor Roosevelt’s memorable insistence that rights must have meaning *“in small places, close to home”*, we are continually reminded just how distant rights discourse and practice seem from those they are meant to serve. Criticisms of human rights as vague, vulnerable to co-option, and concealing structural injustices by focusing on the individual<sup>1</sup>, regularly appear in the pages of influential academic journals and in the media. This in turn provokes reassertions of the need for a human rights practice where the “centre is at the ends of the network”.<sup>2</sup>

This primer focuses on the need to disrupt and democratise human rights practice by placing the participation of those directly affected by rights violations at the centre. It aims to contribute to the conversation about *how* we can bring rights

closer to home, so that those interested in doing or supporting this kind of work have a clearer understanding of what is involved.

The primer is born out of my experiences in human rights education and practice, which have included working and studying in an academic setting, interning at a United Nations High Commission for Refugees, and 12 years of grassroots practice with communities in Northern Ireland at the organisation PPR - Participation and the Practice of Rights (see page 8 for an explainer on PPR). Human rights work is often all-consuming and affords little time for reflection. Being part of the 2018/19 cohort of the Atlantic Fellows for Social and Economic Equity at the London School of Economics afforded me space to reflect on my practice and digest knowledge from world-renowned scholars of global inequalities, radical economics, financialisation, and economies of care. Having previously been so firmly focused on local practice, I found it reinvigorating to learn more about the global forces, institutions and interests that led to the very real socio-economic harms I saw on the

ground. Most importantly, however, I learned from the other Fellows: 18 activists, organisers and thinkers from all over the world.

Becoming a Fellow for Social Justice and Peacebuilding at the Social Change Initiative in 2019 exposed me to a further network of activists and practitioners. It also gave me the time and space I needed to consider how my learning about human rights practice could be usefully disseminated among those working to fully realise the power and potential of human rights.

It is not suggested here that adhering to any specific model or *modus operandi* in social justice work is “the right way”. However, reflecting on models of participative human rights-

based approaches can make a useful contribution to the question of how we ensure rights can be made real – on the ground, in communities, and with the direct involvement of those directly impacted. This primer is therefore intended as the start of a conversation about the role of power and expertise, and about how structures shift when rights holders are placed at the centre of change.



## Why disrupt human rights practice?

Many human rights practitioners, including myself, were exposed to the dominant narrative of rights in law schools, which describes them as possessions, defined and adjudicated upon by international committees at the United Nations, or the Council of Europe, or in courts at The Hague. This is the most common narrative of human rights and is centred around legal norms, treaties, and international institutions, with the signing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 as the defining moment. In this history, the protagonists are largely white western men, lawyers in the main.

**Certainly in the United Kingdom, the high-profile litigation around the Human Rights Act 1998 which adopted into domestic law the rights contained in the European Convention of Human Rights (primarily civil and political rights such as the right to life, to a fair trial and to family life), has reinforced this point of view.**

Scholars have described how rights have been “disembedded”, i.e. removed from the lives of people and local contexts through the creation of “expert systems”, documents, and processes<sup>3</sup>. But as a cursory overview of the literature shows, the traditional methodology of rights practice of court cases, elite institutions and high-level report writing are failing to realise the potential of human rights to effect real change in people’s lives. That these professionalised bodies and institutions so closely resemble the state in their hierarchies and formal, process-based ways of working, only underscores their lack of connection with the people whose rights they are intended to serve and uphold.

An alternative view is that it is people and communities in struggle who are the real authors of human rights, and placing courts, UN mechanisms and Human Rights Commissions in the foreground (as much human rights education does) renders them invisible. In this framing, it is the people who make up social movements – the grassroots activists with lived experience of injustices from discrimination and poor housing to state violence – who are the originators of rights standards,

which then become codified in treaties and laws.<sup>4</sup> And their work is vitally important. In applying global rights standards to real situations on the ground, grassroots movements ensure that rights are no longer vague, abstract concepts, but have substantive content and meaning. Their use in this way can achieve positive local outcomes while also countering the view that rights are irrelevant to people on the ground.

Despite these achievements, the tendency in the conventional human rights space has been to continue to “speak for” the poor and marginalised, without considering how the space we occupy might be better used by those people who are more than able to speak for themselves. We produce reams of evidence-based proposals to solve society’s myriad problems, and they end up gathering dust on a shelf. We bring our whole selves to the work of creating justice in the world, but often end up doing so in environments that fail to uphold the standards of humanity that underpin our work.

Even before the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, the failure of governments to respect, protect and fulfil economic and social rights have fuelled a disaffection with mainstream politics across the globe. Economic exclusion and inequality have led to increasing concentration of power and influence in the hands of an ever-shrinking coterie of elites. This in turn is providing fertile ground for the rise of right-wing movements that are working to introduce regressive policies that infringe the rights of women, migrants, LGBTQI+ communities, indigenous peoples and the disabled. And now the clock is ticking on climate catastrophe, the “greatest threat to human rights in history”<sup>5</sup>.

Mona Younis argues that the failure of the human rights movement has been the assumption that rights-compliant government can be achieved without a

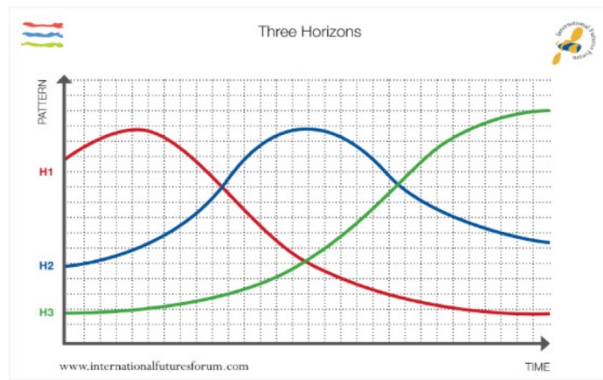
mobilised citizenry.<sup>6</sup> In his report on Climate Change and Poverty, Philip Alston, the former United Nations Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty, articulates a degree of frustration with current human rights practice:

***“Much human rights activity is bureaucratized and sanitised, satisfying itself with formal procedural outcome that might have little direct real world impact. The roots of human rights and the real driving force for progress can only come from community mobilisation. Governments overwhelmingly stand for the status quo and are thus unlikely to take a strong lead when radical change is needed. Much of the human rights community retains strong grassroots links and is well placed to encourage and facilitate community mobilisation. Without it, the natural complacency of government elites and vested interests of financial elites will continue sleep-walking towards catastrophe”***<sup>7</sup>

The time has come to take this diagnosis seriously.

Despite growing consensus around the need for human rights to connect more to grassroots, ideas around how this can be done have rarely been developed. All too often human rights academia, think-tanks and mainstream NGOs rely on what Laurence Cox describes as “detailing this or that social ill in the conscious or unconscious belief that ‘if only the government knew’ they would take action”.<sup>8</sup> The fact that so many academic articles continue to set out impressive frameworks for human rights change, with little consideration of how their recommendations will be brought into reality, highlights the need for further reflection in this regard.

To move beyond the rhetoric of rights beginning in small places, we need to consider concrete examples.



## The Three Horizons

The International Futures Forum's Three Horizons Framework<sup>9</sup> is a useful way to stimulate thinking and discussions about long-term change processes, including the disruptive innovations that are required to build effective human rights practice.

As seen above, the Three Horizons consist of H1, H3, and H2 in between. Each are plotted on an axis charting the pattern's scale or dominance, against time (from present to future).

All three dimensions are always present. The International Futures Forum sets out the three dimensions as follows:

***"H1 represents the present, the current dominant system. As time is passing it starts to look stale and incongruent – how will it try and survive into the future?"***

***"H3 is the future. It's replete with new ideas that right now are on the fringe, but in the end turn out to be better fitted to our new adapting world than the current system."***

***"H2 charts the pattern of disruptions – transition activities and innovations, attempts being made by people in response to new challenges and opportunities thrown up by the pace of change."***

**The current dominant system, which privileges institutional and academic knowledge and work over that of communities themselves, is represented by H1. It promotes a history of human rights that is legal, state-based and Eurocentric, and it reinforces the power of institutions by putting them forward as the means of change, despite their lack of accountability to those they claim to represent. As it continues to be challenged for its shortcomings, it will fight to preserve its survival against the tides of change.**

"Disruptions" to the dominant system can be categorised in two ways. They can be H2-, which is those that are "captured" or absorbed into the mainstream. As Andrea Cornwall<sup>10</sup> observes, the lack of clarity around what "participation" actually means has helped it gain

support from a range of quarters and left it open to co-option by the mainstream. The plethora of consultation processes, consultants, forums and partnerships that take place under the guise of "participation" can have negative effects, discouraging the communities that have given their time to processes that turn out to be mere tick-box exercises. Indeed, it is notable that the term "disruption" has been co-opted by Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, who use it as a term of approval for tech-based

start-up enterprises that effectively entrench capitalist interests.

Disruptions can also be H2+, those that make inroads towards a radically different future. The participation of affected groups in realising their rights is a disruption that markedly changes how we think about and pursue human rights realisation. At its heart, participation is disruptive because it is about power, and the movement of power from those who usually hold it in any structure – governmental or organisational – to those who typically do not. While it is certainly open to being neutralised and turned into tick-box and tokenistic exercises, it has the potential to bring us closer to the vision of rights truly being realised "close to home".

### What is participation?

Participation is defined in international human rights law in a perfunctory and bureaucratic fashion that belies its transformative power. Under Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, it is described as the right to take part in public affairs, to vote and to be elected, and to have access to public service in one's country.

Participation is set out as a component of other human rights, including social and economic rights. It also relies on other rights, such as the right to seek, receive and impart information; the right to express views freely; and the right of association and assembly.<sup>11</sup>

Despite its propensity for capture, participation in decisions made about one's life is about deepening the very meaning and practice of democracy. To make rights claims is to act on the basis

of dignity, not on a basis of victimhood. For change to last, it must be done with people and not to them, in order to build muscle memory of what it is to challenge power and realise rights. It is also effective; within the daily humiliations experienced by people impacted by poverty or inequality, practical solutions can be found that can result in the fulfilment of a right previously denied. Moreover, the meaningful participation of rights-holders is a necessary accountability mechanism in itself. People directly impacted by the local impact of human rights failures often know if the promises for change are fulfilled, because they will either see it in their daily experience or they will not.

Ultimately, placing participation at the heart of human rights is about doing things differently. In order to fulfil its transformation potential, it should bridge the divide between those with technical knowledge about human rights, the law, policy-making and campaigns and those who require that knowledge as a matter of urgency in order to challenge the social deprivation and inequality they face on a daily basis. In essence this requires developing and putting into practice a method of human rights practice – a rights-based approach – that is driven by marginalised groups, brings tangible changes to their socio-economic conditions, and allows them to participate meaningfully in decisions made about their lives by those with power.

This means disrupting traditional human rights practice in several ways.





## Disrupting rights means moving from:

### Advocacy to Organising

- ...recognising people whose rights are not realised as the key agents of change, rather than government and public policy-makers.

### Expert-driven to grassroots-determined knowledge

- ...naming the change required and the timetable for its implementation is done not by external experts, but with the rights-holders themselves, who know exactly how failures of policies and practices affect them.

### Looking past, to starting with, our organisations.

- ...starting with the “human” aspect of human rights in our workforces, as well as in our organising, and putting care at the heart of activism.

In the next chapter, I will consider how organising work, rather than traditional advocacy, can be used to enable affected groups to realise their rights, and will give some examples of practice and highlighting key lessons.

## Explainer: Participation and the Practice of Rights

Participation and the Practice of Rights was established to develop a model of how communities could use socio-economic rights as tools to participate in government decision-making and realise change in their own lives.

**In 2013, Mary Robinson, the former High Commissioner for Human Rights and the former President of Ireland, described PPR’s focus on participation as:**

*“The way human rights work should be, but isn’t, done”.*

The kernel of the idea that became Participation and the Practice of Rights (PPR) emerged in the wake of the 1998 Good Friday Peace Agreement, a time of institutional change in Northern Ireland. The agreement included a range of human rights and equality commitments, most notably the duty on all public bodies in Northern Ireland to pay “due regard” to the promotion of equality amongst people of different religious belief, political opinion, gender, age sexual orientation, disability status, dependent status, marital status, and racial group.<sup>4</sup> The duty also required the participation of people impacted by disadvantage on these grounds, in policy formulation. The intention was to transform the patterns of disadvantage that had fuelled conflict in Northern Ireland.

Ideas around involvement and participation were therefore at the forefront of the minds of many people, including Inez McCormack, the founder of PPR and the first woman to serve as President of

both the National Union of Public Employees and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. She spoke of her belief in the importance of participation in making change during an Irish Congress of Trade Unions address in 2001, stating: *“Change cannot be done to people. It must be done with them to be of sustainable benefit.”*

The focus on social and economic rights arose as it became clear that the Good Friday Agreement, the peace accord that marked the formal cessation of 30 years of conflict in Northern Ireland,<sup>5</sup> and the institutions it established, had done little to alleviate the patterns of poverty and disadvantage before, during and after the conflict, particularly in areas of North Belfast, West Belfast<sup>6</sup> and Derry, and that disproportionately impacted the Catholic community. Social and economic inequality had been a driver of conflict. Only the breaking of these patterns of the past could create a truly lasting and sustainable peace.

# Disruption 1: Organising for Change

Participation disrupts mainstream human rights practice by requiring a shift from advocacy to organising. It asks that when starting a conversation with a community, you begin with their priorities and concerns about their lives, and not with rights. Finding a way to place human rights in the hands of the people also requires looking beyond the skills pool of the usual suspects in the human rights field – the lawyers, the academics and policy analysts – and instead valuing the methodology of those who work with people on the ground now, namely community development workers and the organisers.

While rights are universal, they only become tangible when applied to specific situations in particular contexts – the “small places close to home” that Eleanor Roosevelt spoke of. There is, therefore, significant potential in blending the disciplines of community organising and human rights practice.

## What is community organising?

Community organising is most commonly associated with the tradition established by Saul Alinsky in the United States in the 1930s. But its key principles of seeking to change the power relationships between those in society who make decisions and those who are powerless<sup>12</sup> have existed as long as communities have. Stephanie Leonard, a community organiser who runs the online learning community *Act Build Change* says:

*“Organising believes knowledge comes from the people on the ground affected by the issue, working collectively to solve that problem.”<sup>13</sup>*

While practices vary, community organising generally involves in-person outreach, such as going door to door, or building a presence where people gather, e.g. job centres and health care services. Marshall Ganz describes organisers as builders of relationships, understanding and action:

***“Organizers motivate action by deepening people’s understanding of who they are, what they want, and why. Mobilizing feelings of anger, courage, hopefulness, self-worth, community and urgency, they challenge feelings of fear, despair, self-doubt, isolation, and apathy that inhibit action. They help people articulate their values as a shared story of challenges they face, why they must face them, and why others should help – rooted in who they are, where they’ve been, where they want to go”<sup>14</sup>***

With participation at the centre of human rights practice, bringing together a community, whether bound by geography or mutual interest is the first task. Organising is thus a vital tool in encouraging a deeper engagement of groups in the rights-based issues that impact their lives, and facilitating their ability to take action on them. Through meeting and discussion, the most pressing issues experienced by the community – whether it is poor housing, inadequate mental health services or unemployment –

become clear. The information that is gathered, and the networks that form between the participants, form the basis of the grassroots campaigns that emerge.

### How a group can be organised

In practical terms, many approaches are used to organise and build a group. Through my work at PPR, I observed that as the organisation became more established, it was approached by groups seeking support in campaigning on issues affecting them. At the outset, however, this was not the case.

Below are examples of how some early groups were organised in PPR.

#### **1. Right to Housing Group - The Seven Towers**

One of PPR’s longest-established projects was on the right to housing. It began with a group of female residents of the Seven Towers complex in New Lodge, North Belfast, an area with lengthy waiting lists for social housing. The Seven Towers high-rise apartment blocks had been identified by many community activists as sites of poor housing conditions. Organising the group did not come easily. Staff knocked on doors, and organised meetings in the Towers, with limited success. A breakthrough came with the involvement of one young resident, a single mother named Nadine who saw that the Towers was no place to raise her young daughter. She was instrumental in spreading the word among her neighbours, and a further leafleting of the Towers took place in which residents were invited to a “Diary Room” event to speak on camera about their housing. The resulting short film was shown at screenings at the Towers, where residents came together and began to speak to each other about their housing conditions and what they had done thus far, and finally to their becoming involved in working with PPR to address their issues.

#### **2. Belfast Mental Health Rights Group**

The subject of mental health and high suicide rates came up regularly in discussions with community workers in the early days of PPR. Via local support groups,

staff members were introduced to people who had lost family members to suicide, or who had had personal experience of mental health issues or self-harm. One of the groups included a couple, Gerard and Carol McCartan, who had lost their son Danny to suicide just after his 18th birthday. Several health trusts had been involved in his treatment, and the extent of the failures of communication and care led to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland ordering an independent review of his case. Along with others, they began to identify elements of the mental health care system that they wanted to change, including appointments for those in crisis, reform the complaints system, and ensuring that mental health care would be provided by general practitioners. Significantly, the group described how they were frequently asked to attend and “participate” in decision-making bodies, but that typically they were asked only to tell their personal stories, rather than having the opportunity for meaningful participation in the decisions being taken. This motivated them to become involved in human rights work that challenged this top-down, paternalistic approach.

#### **3. Right to Work: Right to Welfare Group**

As the austerity policies imposed across the UK after 2010 began to be felt by members of the groups we worked with at PPR, they asked to start a campaign around unemployment, and social security. The group members and PPR staff organised outside the local social security office, inviting people going in to join them for a discussion at the Golden Thread Art Gallery directly across the street. Many spoke of how they had spent months and in some cases years being told that they were the problem – and that the onus was on them to find jobs that, it seemed clear to them, simply didn’t exist. Many had been sent on “back to work” training schemes that had failed to assist them in finding employment. Others had received “sanctions”: the withdrawal of their social security entitlements for perceived infringements of rules, leaving them destitute and reliant on food banks or the support of family and friends. They identified the dual problems of the lack of jobs, and insufficient and frequently unjustly withheld social security provisions, as the basis for their campaign.

## KEY LESSONS

### Start where people are at

A key piece of learning from organising work is the need to start where people are. This means that the first conversation with people impacted by a human rights violation is not about rights. Instead it is about the issues that those people are facing. People become involved in campaigning for a range of reasons. Very often they want to make sure that the manner in which they were treated by providers of public services, such as health or housing, was addressed. One person involved in the mental health group that PPR worked with explained:

***“I joined the group because of my son’s attempted suicide and because he didn’t get the help that he needed. He tried again and he is now left with disabilities. I wanted to make sure this didn’t happen to someone else.”***

Membership of these groups will naturally ebb and flow, and it is important to build in opportunities to outreach and organise at every step of the work. One way this was done by PPR was through peer surveys, which provide a simple mechanism for group members to make contact with others who have been similarly affected by these issues, and then a reason to revert to them with survey results, and ask them to become involved. Other tactics can include campaign actions, protests, holding focus groups, making films, undertaking social media actions, and inclusion in WhatsApp or social media groups.

Momentum is important. Wherever possible, it was helpful to identify small wins – practical changes in services and/or practice that could be achieved quickly, energise the group, and then be used to build momentum for greater change. Sometimes these materialised: for example, within three months of the launch of the Seven Towers campaign, the landings of each of the high rises had been cleared of the deluge of pigeon waste that had been there for years, endangering residents’ health. Other times, however, the “small win” took years. A change to the mental health appointment system that ensured people attending hospital Accident & Emergency rooms received information on their next appointment – the “Card Before You Leave” – was originally seen by the Belfast Mental Health Rights Group as a first step target, but it went on to take six years to fully realise.

### Provide time and care

Organising for change with a group directly impacted by socio-economic inequality will take more time and support than is normally expected at the outset. The Seven Towers group’s housing campaign took around 11 months to go from inception to launch. The support a group needs may be practical, such as assistance with social security assessments; emotional, as when attending court cases or inquiries into a loved one’s death; or developmental, in providing encouragement to people to do what they can for themselves and to step out of their comfort zone to build skills and

confidence. It is always worth remembering that “meeting people where they are” includes their emotions.

Stephanie Green, who worked to support and organise the Belfast Mental Health Rights Group, says:<sup>15</sup>

***“People have lives, and you are going to lose them as campaigners if you don’t support them. If you don’t treat people with respect and with care, [working for change] becomes just another system they distrust, as they’ve already been treated like a cog, or not as a human being.”***

The reality of organising people who directly experience poverty and inequality is that it is vital to assist them to tackle the issues that are barriers to their organising work (e.g. the denial of a social security claim, or the inquest after the death of a family member). While it is important not to end up doing for people what they can do for themselves, as this is the opposite of what organising aims to achieve, it must also be acknowledged that people will drop out of the work, and sometimes for no clear reason. Organisers can work to keep them in the loop, and check in on them without applying pressure, to reinforce the message that the door is always open to their return.

### Navigate tension and resistance

Communities often feel state-established consultation processes and public involvement forums are ineffective. Yet by circumventing these forums, and seeking to shape policy formation through building power from the grassroots, communities will often be met with a negative reaction from power.

There is much to be said for beginning a campaign by reminding those with decision-making power of their obligations under international and local human rights and equality obligations, showing them the affected group’s experiences and evidence, and asking them to do the right thing. In some cases PPR was involved in, this has been successful: the Belfast Mental Health Rights Group were able to establish an important alliance and productive relationship with a local coroner, which led to a change in policy that meant that the families of those who died in hospital as a result of suicide were offered mental health care. Prior to this, family members in these circumstances had slipped through the net and did not receive this support.

This experience contrasted with the Belfast Mental Health Group’s disappointing experience years earlier, when the Card Before You Leave initiative was adopted as a result of their campaign. The local health authority formed a project board to put the new system in place and after much discussion, the group decided they wanted to join it to ensure that the initiative was implemented properly. As time progressed, the group discovered that key parts of the scheme were being dropped and decisions about the Card Before You Leave project were being made outside the room and without their involvement. The group escalated their

campaigning work and stepped away from the project board. The tension resulting from the group's desire to meaningfully participate, and the resistance to that desire by the Board, was in this case insurmountable.

Tension and discomfort are a necessary part of change-making, and resistance is unavoidable. As Frederick Douglass said:

***“If there is no struggle there is no progress. Those who profess to favour freedom and yet deprecate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground, they want rain without thunder and lightning... Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.”*** 16

## Challenge the narrative

Overtuning the narrative of how people in poverty are seen, and may see themselves, is vital. People affected by poverty are impacted twice: first by the lack of material resources, and then by the narrative that is told about them.<sup>17</sup> People with power do not only control the resources that are available to the poor, but also control a societal narrative through their dominance in media and political arenas. The poor and marginalised are demonised, and constructed as “other” through words, images and policy. They are judged to be lacking, which leads to injuries in dignity and self-worth or shame.

This process can be overturned through a participative practice of rights. As people gather to discuss the ineffectiveness of their heating system, or the shoddy maintenance work carried out on their homes by the housing authority, they find commonality in how issues affect them. They also become human to each other, and form bonds of community. The role of human connection and storytelling in this transformative shift cannot be underestimated.

The emancipatory and bonding power of human rights has been an important idea for centuries. For example, in a study of 19<sup>th</sup>-century radical artisans in England and France, lowerth Prothero states:

***“Rights can be an effective and exhilarating instrument which can facilitate a change in people's***

***self-image and be a liberating and even revolutionary rhetoric.”*** 18

As you achieve tangible change, you are also building communities that are literate in their human rights and the steps to take to realise them.

## Even when we lose, we win

Establishing our own humanity is a vital part of beginning to challenge wrong. Involving people in articulating their daily challenges as rights issues, and practicing the exercise of their human rights through monitoring, challenging and campaigning, means that the realisation of rights moves towards their grasp. It has additional benefits: it instils the knowledge of challenge, gained through practice, in marginalised communities. It also moves the goalposts of what is possible for other organisations, either practicing or interested in using rights in local contexts. In short, it is human dignity in action.

In her book *Call Them by Their True Names: American Crises (and Essays)*, Rebecca Solnit notes that despite the decline of the Occupy movement, its work continues to have impact:

***“There were results as direct as homeless advocacy, as indirect as a shift in the national debates about housing, medical and student debt, economic injustice, and inequality...”*** 19

Change, in particular social change, is not linear. It may often feel as if we lose more than we win. However, by building a human rights-literate community, versed in power, and with experience in deploying a range of tools of action, and in the process of pursuing better social security or health systems, we sow the seeds of future change.

A key way to build the power of grassroots groups is through the documentation of their own knowledge and building an evidence base around the human rights failures that impact them. Next I will set out how research and knowledge creation can centre the voices of the grassroots.



# Disruption 2: Using Grassroots Knowledge

One autumn afternoon I listened to the Irish activist Bernadette McAliskey being interviewed on the popular Blindboy podcast. She spoke about her election in 1969 as Member of Parliament for Mid Ulster and how she had used this role to build power behind the communities she worked with at home.

*"You see, I had read the book,"* she said, referring to Erskine May, the 19<sup>th</sup>-century text that set out the rules of parliamentary practice. *"You have to read the book; you have to know the rules."*

Knowledge of the policies and practices of government and decision-makers is obviously important for those seeking to change them, and those directly and adversely affected by such policies have a unique and valuable knowledge of them. Yet what we value as knowledge and the methods we use to gather it are political and value-laden choices. Work deriving from white, global North academics is often given considerably more weight than that from members of marginalised communities. Often the knowledge of the latter is harvested by the former, with very little return for the communities.

The work of knowledge creation can be used to shift power. When those who are affected by a problem interrogate and define it, they become the centre of research – not the "site" of their problem. Through a participative approach to human rights practice, the experiences of those impacted and disadvantaged by government policies is put at the centre of knowledge acquisition and recognised as indispensable to furthering change. All other forms of knowledge are built around that centre.

## What is action research?

Simply put, action research is research that informs action. Action research as a term emerged in the 1920s and is characterised as including the following principles: **20**

- Action research is not a stand-alone initiative, but part of a larger effort to make practical social change;
- It must demystify, i.e. be presented clearly and in a reader-friendly manner, despite the tendency of academic circles to favour complicated and abstract ideas.
- Action research can be addressed to the public at large, not just government experts
- It requires the consideration of ethics: research being carried out with people directly impacted by inequality or poverty should be obliged to lead to action to address those conditions.
- Hindrance/external influence from funders should be avoided.
- Action research should represent the pursuit of knowledge as a collective endeavour, and should not feature *"solo runs borne of strong convictions"*.

Action research also challenges the idea that "objectivity" is the hallmark of good research. A conventional view is that proximity to an issue or involvement in action diminishes objectivity. Yet academia is a site of privilege, with universities benefitting from public funding, students' fees and lucrative relationships with corporations and foreign states. It is far from neutral ground, and so action research practitioners highlight the need for clarity of position and intellectual honesty.

### Carrying out action research

Action research is a form of human rights education, but rather than focusing on the content and processes of international human

rights procedures, it takes an approach similar to that of Paolo Freire, with people discussing their problems and experiences as a starting point. In order to place the "privileged knowledge" of international human rights in the hands of people directly affected by violations, we worked to demystify and clarify international and domestic legislation and policy standards so that they became accessible to people experiencing social and economic abuses, wrapping them around the evidence from their own experiences. The process was generally as follows:

- A group of people affected by a particular socio-economic issue, such as poor housing or inadequate mental health services, meets with PPR organising staff and identifies the ways the issue impacts them, such as high heating bills for a draughty flat, or long waits for counselling provision.
- Referring to the International Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights General Comments and jurisprudence from the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, PPR's policy worker does an audit to establish which of the issues the group are impacted by are most strongly grounded in international human rights standards.
- This information goes back to the group, which considers them further. PPR's organising staff encourage them to consider the issues that correlate most strongly with provisions in human rights law. Have their priorities been understood correctly? Are there any to add or elaborate on? The group's members are often struck by the difference between what international standards provide for, and their reality on the ground.
- The group discusses how to find out more about these issues. Who else is affected and how? How might they become involved? Research methods that serve all these

purposes are discussed and identified.

- The revised issues go back to the policy staff member, who researches local policies and standards around the issue chosen. He or she reviews the policy landscape to establish if any relevant standards are being breached.
- This information is fed back to the members of the group, who gain further insights into the way in which their local decision makers have interpreted, or more often ignored, the international standards they are bound by. The group brainstorms ideas for its preferred research methods, which is most commonly a community survey.
- These ideas are taken by the policy staff, who drafts the first version of the survey, keeping it as brief and relevant as possible. Survey respondents can remain anonymous, but are offered the opportunity to be kept updated with the results of the survey and/or to become more involved in the campaign. The survey goes to the group for input.
- A revised version is fed back to the policy worker for final revisions and advice.
- The final survey (as well as any accompanying information sheet) is signed off by the group. Members practice delivering the survey in teams others, set a target number of responses, and work out a plan to gather the required data.

Different pieces of knowledge are layered, from the apparently aspirational international standard, to the more tangible local obligation, to the reality on the ground as borne out by people's experience and action research work. This process allows groups to compare paper-based international human rights and local policy standards with the situation as they experience it. The differences are always stark. Groups are also supported to gather evidence for their campaign and to attract powerful allies in the international human rights field.

## Measuring change



A grassroots human rights indicators and benchmarks methodology developed with PPR <sup>21</sup> is a further example of a tool that was designed for governments, and taken up by communities. Demystification of often obscurely worded human rights concepts is vital if communities are to use them as tools. Article 2 (1) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights provides a case in point. It outlines a state's obligations in relation to social and economic rights as follows:

*“Each State Party to the present Covenant undertakes to take steps, individually and through international assistance and co-operation, especially economic and technical, to the maximum of its available resources, with a view to **achieving progressively the full realisation of the rights** recognized in the present Covenant by all appropriate means, including particularly the adoption of legislative measures.” <sup>22</sup> (emphasis added)*

The kind of technical language used in the Covenant presents a significant barrier to the adoption of human rights by communities as an effective vehicle for change.

**At its, simplest progressive realisation signifies that in relation to housing, health, work, social security and other socio-economic rights, government has an obligation to ensure that things improve, and that conditions for people are getting better. Indicators are basically measurements that can be monitored by the group periodically, usually over a year, to assess whether things are getting better on the ground in this community, and whether the government is progressively realising rights as required by human rights law.**

**Groups can also set targets that allow them to measure the pace of change by government, and, when pre-existing policy/legal commitments are taken into account, judge whether it is acceptable to the directly affected community.**

The conditional nature of the commitment described in the Covenant – to “progressively realise” rights rather

than immediately guarantee them – gave rise to legitimate concerns that it offered a get-out clause to governments, who would inevitably take these rights less seriously than civil and political rights such as the right to a fair trial or the right to life. And despite being required to do so by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, many states have failed to develop their own measurements to assess how they are fulfilling these commitments.

A grassroots human rights indicators and benchmarks methodology is designed to turn the tables on those who hold the power to effect change but have not done so. Rather than allowing the Covenant to remain a get-out clause, grassroots-designed indicators present a way to measure whether rights are being made real on the ground. Through their participation and using their experience of how services or policies fell short, communities can call for change in a manner and at a speed chosen by them. The grassroots indicators and benchmarks focus on implementation –

in other words, whether change is being experienced on the ground – rather than how it is being reported by government.

If we accept that what we see as knowledge is political, and that researcher “objectivity” is a highly contested concept, it follows that what we choose to measure in order to assess progress in the social justice sphere is a clear indication of what we value. The lives and priorities of the most marginalised provide a fitting viewpoint from which to measure the speed and extent of change.

Below are examples of the indicators and benchmarks from the right to housing campaign back in 2007. Note that the international standard is used to interpret or “back up” the domestic standard, which is then compared with the baseline measurement – which is the reality on the ground. So while the international and domestic standard represents what the situation should be, the baseline represents what it really is.

ISSUE: DRAINAGE AND SEWAGE
<p><b>INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS STANDARD</b>            “An adequate house must contain certain facilities essential for health including... sanitation, safe drainage...  <small>CESCR General Comment 4, Paragraph 8 (b)</small></p>
<p><b>Northern Ireland Housing Executives’ Responsibility</b>            Sewage ingress is classed as an ‘emergency repair’ which should be carried out within 24 hours.            Blocked drains are classed as ‘urgent repairs’, which should be carried out within 4 working days.</p>
ISSUE: DRAINAGE AND SEWAGE
<p><b>Indicator</b>            % of residents reporting drainage and sewage problems.  <b>Baseline</b>            In April monitoring 65% reported problems with drainage and sewage.</p>
<p><b>Benchmarks</b>            April 2007 - 65% of residents reported problems            November 2007 - 30% of residents reported problems            April 2008 - 35% of residents reporting problems</p>

### Fig.1 Examples of Indicators and Benchmarks from the Right to Housing Campaign in 2007

The indicators are simply drawn, and should be relatively easy to gather information on. The indicators frame the campaign, “name” and problematise the issue and set and determine the pace of change that is deemed acceptable by the group and should be met by government. While the indicator methodology and evidence gathering is not an end in itself, like the organising work, it serves to build the power of the impacted group in order to better challenge decision-makers, and shape rights realisation in their own lives.

# KEY LESSONS

## Demystify rights

The location of human rights as a legal specialism, taught in university law schools and practiced in international courts, means that it is treated as a form of knowledge for the privileged: expensive to obtain, and to exchange. And of course, particularly in the academic field, knowledge is a currency, and specialisms and theoretical innovation are rewarded, often regardless of the contribution such knowledge makes to improving the lives of people on the ground. Working to demystify rights goes against this tide, and requires a different skill set. We know, however, that activists who have an interest in social change do not tend to learn about tools or tactics from academic journals or textbooks, but in conversation with others. Moreover, we cannot expect to make systemic change by supporting the accumulation of knowledge by a small number of people employed by institutions.

Thankfully, university courses that not only look at the content of human rights laws, but also consider the nature of change and how it comes about, are becoming more common. One example is the BCL in Law and Social Justice degree at University College in Dublin, for which Dr. Judy Walsh (who also is the Vice Chair of PPR) is the Programme Director. She notes that from her own experience in a human rights NGO she realised that it was:

***“very different waters to what we would formally come across when we were learning about human rights at university... and it is resolved by learning from those kind of jarring experiences where these worlds just don't gel, and they should challenge. And so when I got a chance a few years later to design a human rights course that I would teach myself, I was always really clear that this has to be about human rights mobilisation.”*** <sup>23</sup>

## Name the problem

In the housing campaign in North Belfast, the issue of pigeon waste became emblematic of how poor communities are treated: the small, everyday incidents of disrespect that nevertheless have a huge impact on people's living environment and sense of self. It became a clear symbol of the campaign, and a way to give voice to what was elusive and hard to express to those outside the community.

In situations of powerlessness, naming the change required can be difficult. Before problems have names, which identify them as problems, they do not exist, except to those who live with their consequences. To name is to problematise, and for those previously unaware of anyone's dissatisfaction with the status quo, it can cause discomfort.

The reaction from power upon naming the change that is needed has not been lost on feminist writers. Sara Ahmed says:

***“To give a problem a name can change not only how we register an event but whether we register an event... When we give problems their name, we can become a problem for those who do not want to talk about a problem, even though they know there is a problem.”*** <sup>24</sup>

Inez McCormack often observed that to be speaking out about the problem of inequality in social housing impacting the Catholic community during Northern Ireland's 30-year conflict, meant that you were presumed to be for the war. In the years following the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, it meant you were seen as against the peace. The received wisdom, backed by those trying to market “Northern Ireland Plc” to foreign investors, was that these issues were now part of the past. Or, even if they were not, speaking of them recalled the bad old days, and hindered the confidence in the peace process that was seen as vital for the economic development necessary to deliver a “new” Northern Ireland. Yet those tenants forced to live in substandard accommodation while enduring years on a social housing waiting list knew better.

Before coming together and naming the issue, and the change required, some of those we campaigned with reported that when individual battles with decision-makers had not made a difference, they had begun to wonder whether their current situation was, in fact, all they could expect.

Developing the knowledge that allows you to define your situation gives you power. Groups begin to define their own agenda and claim space previously occupied by those who “spoke for” them. <sup>25</sup> Anecdotes are developed into research. And what is problematised changes: it is no longer the people who are the problem.

## Make change in practice, not on paper

At the centre of many social justice organisations' theory of change is the importance given to authoritative research and evidence-gathering. And while it is vital, much more is needed. Dustin Kramer from the Social Justice Coalition, a South African NGO describes spending a year on a budget advocacy project in which the organisation became involved in intense debates with government over what was factual information and what was not. He states:

***“SJC countered each response, usually through more facts and evidence. By the end of 2015 we understood that we did not have the right leverage and that a fight over the ‘truth’ was not going to take us any further. Trying to win an argument, without finding the leverage to actually challenge power, could never be a winning strategy.”*** <sup>26</sup>

Data gathering on its own is rarely enough, and it's important to ensure that the community does not end up serving the data-gathering, rather than the data-gathering serving the community. In addition, undertaking surveys and speaking to peers about their

experiences with poor housing or unemployment enables the group to organise as well as evidence-gather. It allows group members to engage with others affected by the same issue, deepening their understanding of the issue, and making connections with other potential members of the campaign. The process of evidence-gathering is as important as the evidence that is gathered, as it allows a group of activists to grow and bond.

## Build mutually reinforcing alliances

Linking to key players in the UN human rights mechanisms and global NGO networks is a vital part of building the power of grassroots and community-based groups. Articulating their issues as human rights issues brings in international allies. It rightly locates the struggle of the groups in the international context, where many similar rights-based struggles are taking place, and enables them to tap into alliances and expertise that can strengthen their domestic campaign. Global standards become practical tools in the hands of communities, externalising and reinforcing their struggle. In turn, they give substantive content to vaguely drawn norms and concepts such as progressive realisation, challenging the argument that rights are too bureaucratic to be of use in the daily life of marginalised groups.

## Channel time

Time is not a neutral factor for those seeking change, although almost every campaigner will have had the experience of it being used against them to delay and therefore prevent positive change. Decision-makers who hold the purse strings of public budgets know the efficacy of this tactic, and that they will be around longer than many insecurely funded NGOs or community groups.

Inez McCormack wrote about the role of time in social change by noting that the famous US Supreme Court judgment *Brown v. Board of Education*, which found school segregation on the basis of skin colour to be unconstitutional, but did not set a timetable for the change to be implemented. Twenty years later, American state schools remained segregated.

Inez observed:

***“Change was to be at the time and speed comfortable to those required to change, not at the time and speed of those who needed it.” 27***

Changing this state of affairs was core to aims behind the adoption of the indicators and benchmarks methodology that allowed communities to harness “time” and drive the agenda in terms of normative substance and the timeline for change. Those seeking change will inevitably be met with what Inez called “the doctrine of unripe time”: the view that *“that change is not necessary, not possible, it will cost too much, it is divisive” 28*

When affected groups set the timetable for change, however, it does not mean that it will materialise in the stated timeframe. But it does challenge the idea that the time is not right for change, and highlights the fact that “justice delayed is justice denied” is as applicable to economic and social justice as it is to civil and political rights.

Tensions within and between institutions working for social change is an important topic to tackle for anyone considering the future of human rights practice. In the next chapter, I will consider the shifts required in order for organisations to truly centre the voices of those they seek to serve, and to make our activism sustainable as we tackle social, economic, and environmental challenges on a unprecedented scale.



# DISRUPTION 3: Starting with our organisations

*"If you're not capable of being hurt, you're not capable of being effective."*

Inez McCormack in the documentary *Inez: A Challenging Woman, Below the Radar*

A disruptive practice of rights requires us to consider how our organisations work, and also how we extend human rights principles of dignity and equality to our staff. In this section, I consider the organisational infrastructure necessary to support participative human rights work. And as concerns grow around burnout and the emotional toll of social justice work, I will also consider the role of care in human rights organisations and how organisations can work to promote and encourage sustainable activism.

## Why our organisations are important



Human rights organisations that focus explicitly on working with communities rather than on achieving change through legislation and high-level advocacy remain unusual, particularly in the context of the United Kingdom. This has much to do with the emphasis on litigation as a means of social change that occurred as a result of the Human Rights Act. The Act, which brought the European Convention on Human Rights into UK law, was a landmark event, enabling the rights in that treaty (including the right to life, right to a fair trial, and right to a family life) to be litigated before domestic courts for the first time. And yet the impact of this adoption into the domestic legal framework had a number of unintended consequences. The idea that human rights were the domain of specialist legal experts was further reinforced closer to home in Northern Ireland, as the St. Andrews Agreement of 2006 between the British and Irish governments restated a commitment to, but did not in the end produce, a Bill of Rights reflecting the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland, and an Irish Language Act, as a means of delivering on rights and equality.

Consequently, there were few obvious blueprints for establishing organisational structures and modes of operating that are in line with the ethos of a participative rights approach to human rights work. Internationally, much human rights work is carried out by large international NGOs, but as Neil Stammers observes, it is rare that there are meaningful and robust dialogues between these organisations and those they represent. **29**

Participation requires a shift in control. Alnoor Ebrahim observes that sharing of power requires going beyond tools such as participatory impact assessments to *"enabling communities to share in programmatic and financial decision-making through voting membership or key decision making bodies, and even by recruiting community members into management staff"* **30**

While participative tools are important, they are not sufficient to deliver participative practice on their own. A truly participative ethos must be supported throughout the organisation, including at board level.

## Operating for participative change

In the early days of PPR, much thought was given to the structures of the organisation, prioritising community buy-in and ownership. The initial arrangements featured a Board (termed the Management Committee) and two Steering Groups, one for each of the two "main communities" in Northern

Ireland. Campaign Support Groups and a Chairperson's advisory board were also planned. Most of the traditional ways in which organisations perform accountability are focused on proving themselves to funders or regulator authorities (through financial disclosure statements, evaluations, codes of behaviour).

There was recognition at PPR that the organisation needed instead to

be accountable to those it worked with.

A priority was building relationships with local community workers, as the original thinking was that PPR would get access to and be accountable to the marginalised people it worked with through the Steering Groups. But the work developed differently. Valuable guidance and suggestions were given by a number of people

involved in community work in North Belfast, for example the female community worker who had done a research project in the Seven Towers high-rise flats documenting poor living conditions, and recommended that PPR speak to people there. But there was no shortcut to the hard organising work of door-knocking, public meeting and surveys described in Chapter 2.

In a blog post by PPR's Co-Directors published on OpenGlobalRights in 2012, the organisational ethos was explained as follows:

***“This work requires a different staff structure from that of traditional human rights organisations. It needs organisers capable of inspiring, skilling and mentoring people: policy workers who focus on ‘demystifying’ human rights principles, so they can be grasped and used by the directly impacted: and a management system which allows strategic and operational priorities to emerge from the ground up, not the top down. The focus is not on being the voice of the poor: rather it is on enabling them to speak for themselves.” 31***

PPR board members had vast expertise in campaigning and human rights, yet they did not give direction to the staff and groups on what to campaign on. Having a board that understood the importance of enabling campaign decisions to be taken by affected

groups, rather than by them, was vital, and required an approach based on humility and an understanding of what is needed to create space for others. Dr. Judy Walsh, a board member for more than 10 years and currently the Vice-Chair of PPR, says:

***“The Board was very differently constituted to most boards in human rights organisations... It was a huge learning experience for me as well, just to understand that this was not about advocacy and this was not about our expertise, but about supporting and helping to inform the experiential knowledge that was absolutely front and centre.” 32***

PPR's staffing structure of organising and policy staff who work together at the service of groups was both innovative and key to the success of the work. And beyond this, it was necessary to establish an ethos that meant that every member of staff, including administrative and finance personnel, were oriented towards service of the groups. Open supportive working relationships and clear channels of communication are important in any workplace, but it is particularly important in work that involves such a heightened awareness of power relations and structures.

Perhaps the best way to describe the relationship between staff and groups is that of co-conspirators.

Staff take a leading role in meetings – organising them, providing a venue, and leading the meeting by recapping what has been done to date or putting forward ideas for strategy or campaign actions. Staff do not “represent” groups in the sense that a trade union official might. The presence of the group at meetings with officials and government ministers was non-negotiable. On one memorable occasion, the group Equality Can't Wait – who campaigned on social housing supply and inequality – travelled to Stormont, the seat of the Northern Ireland Assembly, for a meeting with the Minister in charge of housing. The minister declined to meet with the group, and asked instead to see only the staff

members. His attempt to divide and undermine was seen for what it was, and he met with no one from the campaign that day.

Practical considerations are also important. Organisational premises should be a space conducive and welcoming to the groups, somewhere they felt was also theirs. In 2016, PPR moved office from a city centre location to a business park. It was still in the centre of Belfast, and still walkable, although slightly further away from bus routes. Ensuring the office remained accessible to people from the community, by creating a feeling that it was “their space”, was priority.

## KEY LESSONS

### Joy in rights practice

***“Care means looking in a holistic way. It is a fundamental goal of what we want to do in the world... It is also our strategy; if we do not experience caring, [if we] neglect... ourselves, the careful world we want will not come.” 33***

**(Brazilian activist)**

Activism can be life-enhancing work that enables human beings, as social animals, to come together with others in expression of their values, to build deep connections, and to work towards a mutual vision of justice in the world. 34 Studies have shown that taking part in activist endeavours is linked to higher levels of well-being, and the feelings of connection and solidarity

that come with standing with others in common cause are a source of pleasure and joy. 35 Yet, counter to popular perception, the majority of activist work is mundane, consisting of what can feel like endless meetings and administrative tasks.

This is why it is so important to ensure that space for celebration is built in – such as meals enjoyed together, and evenings away if budgets permit – so that participants' labour is recognised and valued appropriately. We want our activists to stay in the field, and while the scale of the challenges we face is immense, despair and exhaustion only play to the interests of those seeking to maintain the status quo. Over-focusing on the need to produce and act also risks not leaving space and time for valuable reflective work, which gives perspective by allowing us to regroup and take stock, and helps us to identify what practices we

should be developing and which we should abandon because they are not working.

## Collaborations need a conscious approach

In his book *Why Social Movements Matter: An Introduction*, Laurence Cox describes the trade-offs that take place in moments of significant social change, where those with power seek to diffuse crises with concessions that do not threaten the social order. He warns that not everyone gets the changes that they hoped for: *“In fact what emerges is often a new formation in which some popular demands come to the fore and strike a deal with capitalism at the expense of others”*.<sup>36</sup>

Collaborations are vital, therefore, if we are to move beyond the divide and conquer response from power. Adopting a participative approach to human rights practice can mean that traditional coalition work is tricky, as staff are not at liberty to sign up to particular policy stances or actions without the involvement of the group. However, social change work requires us to develop powerful alliances, which break down silos and enable human rights practitioners from different fields to work together effectively. But how can this occur without breaking down and understanding the silos and power dynamics at play between different players such as international NGOs and grassroots groups? In 2018, the New York-based Center for Economic and Social Rights held a session in Lima, Peru entitled *Beyond Boundaries: Allying human rights with other struggles for social and economic justice*.<sup>37</sup> The aim was to provide “a space to reflect on the challenges faced in working for ESC rights across different fields of advocacy, the conditions that make such collaboration effective, how it can be fostered and how mutual learning can be improved.”

Attendees discussed the factors that they felt inhibited fruitful collaborations across disciplines. Competitive attitudes were cited as an obstacle, with organisations seeking credit for their individual input rather than their contribution to a collective; equally problematic was the self-righteousness and elitism of some rights advocates. Recommendations included the need for NGOs to institutionalise processes to promote collaboration, for researchers to redefine what is considered valuable research and knowledge, and for funders to see themselves as part of the effort rather than an outside accountability mechanism. These are the kinds of conversations that need to be had, and issues that need to be named and then addressed in order to provide the basis for the effective, cross-discipline collaborations that are so badly needed in the human rights and social justice arena.

## Sustaining activism

The importance of extending our commitment to dignity and humanity within our organisations cannot be underestimated. To act with integrity in our work means it is not acceptable for our workplaces to preach one standard of behaviour to government and public bodies, and then deliver another to their own staff.

However, the indications from official studies<sup>38</sup>, media reports about organisations such as Oxfam and Amnesty International, and via our own networks, make it clear that social justice organisations often do not respond well to the challenges of maintaining the well-being of their staff, and that staff turnover and burnout is rife.

The authors of the Amnesty International Wellbeing Review,<sup>39</sup> which was carried out after the suicide of two staff members, refers to a phenomenon known as “mission mirroring” where an organisation can become embroiled in the same kinds of conflict it seeks to address externally. It can lead to an “us versus them” mentality within the organisation, as the “fight” in our flight-fight-freeze survival response is stimulated. We also know that without care and attention and accountability, our spaces of resistance can reflect and reinforce the gendered and racialised structures that they oppose so fiercely.

The nature of human rights work is such that activists are often witness to suffering that results in vicarious trauma. As Margaret Satterthwaite highlights, exposure to human distress can lead activists to minimise their own suffering. Even where this is not the case, social justice work is long, hard, and often bereft of “wins”. Jobs are often temporary and can be low paid, and those who work in the sector are motivated not by financial compensation but by their individual political or moral convictions. The huge scale of the task of tackling human rights abuses means that even vast amounts of work and commitment do not feel anywhere near enough to make change.<sup>40</sup> Our working cultures *“too often valorize martyr and saviour mentalities, and stigmatise well-being concerns.”*<sup>41</sup>

In the face of this challenge, an individualised approach to care and self-care is not sufficient to redress the balance. Instead, it is essential that we look at the issue collectively and through the lens of structures and systems, and focus on the organisational structures and culture in which we work.

One inspiring development is the Frida Fund Happiness Manifestx released in 2019.<sup>42</sup> The Frida Fund is a foundation that aims to amplify the impact of young feminist groups, and to transform power and relationships in philanthropy. The word “Manifestx” is used to denote the political nature of its commitment to self-care and also maintain gender inclusivity, developed through a series of reflections and placed at the heart of its organisational culture and representing a commitment to centre care in all its work. It includes commitments on the part of workers to communicate when they are overtired, disavow guilt, and to delete their work email from their phone, and on the part of the Frida Fund to provide clear decision-making and communication processes, to provide training and coaching, and to institute a four-day week, with Fridays spent reading and writing about feminist organising. It says: *“We believe that taking care of ourselves is in our best political and feminist interest, to take a deliberate stand in challenging the patriarchal, hierarchical, and neoliberal systems that govern us.”*

# Conclusion

**Foregrounding the “human” aspect of human rights forces change, both in how we conceptualise rights and how we use them. We are required to look at ourselves and our organisations and embrace complexity – including the possibility that in seeking to realise rights, we may be occupying space better suited for another; the preconceived ideas we may hold about knowledge; how we get in our own way in seeking to form collaborations. We must embrace the complexity of others – and acknowledge that those we strongly disagree with politically are likely kind to their families and concerned for their children’s future.**

It’s never been more urgent to get beyond the rhetoric of bringing rights home, and instead consider what fulfilling that commitment actually requires of us. Racial injustice and climate breakdown are bringing people onto the streets. We are seeing in real time, on our screens, the power that everyday people have to envision change, and bring it into reality. And as our planetary resources reach the limits of growth and we need to abandon anthropocentric world-view in which humans are paramount, further disruption to our current understanding of rights and who has them are on the horizon.

More conversations are needed, not around the necessity of grassroots human rights work, but around the “how”. How do we encourage and facilitate community mobilisation with integrity? How do we find reward in the process of our activism as we strive towards our end goals? We will not convince people in the abstract or through traditional human rights education that rights are a good thing to be fought for. We must put them at the service of those who need the promise they represent to be fulfilled. We can learn with humility – by doing.

Among the most important questions is how traditional human rights actors can make space for the grassroots and community struggles who are the true authors of human rights. How can funders and academics ensure their expertise and access to resources is placed at the service of people in tight places who are working towards change? Can coalitions between activist groups and their corresponding formal NGOs work in a way that

recognises and respects the different experiences and expertise that everyone is bringing to the table? Striving to make space for and offer support to more grassroots human rights initiatives requires practitioners to adjust our expectation around pace, knowledge and speaking rights to enable them to flourish. It may seem like a big ask, but the size of the demand is dwarfed by the potential prize – a vibrant creative human rights sector. One that attests to the relevance and importance of these international standards, borne of people’s struggles the world over, and one that will enable both the standards and the people to flourish into the future.



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