

# CHANGE FROM THE GROUND UP

**Disrupting Rights: Putting people at the centre of change**



## **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.

# 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."***<sup>16</sup>

## 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 also became 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."***<sup>18</sup>

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..."***<sup>19</sup>

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.