

CHANGE FROM THE GROUND UP

Disrupting Rights: Putting people at the centre of change



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 19th-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.

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.” ²³

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.” ²⁴

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. ²⁵ 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.”
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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.