

CHANGE FROM THE GROUND UP

Disrupting Rights: Putting people at the centre of change



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.

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”*.³⁶

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*.³⁷ 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 studies³⁸, 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,³⁹ 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. ⁴⁰ Our working cultures *“too often valorize martyr and saviour mentalities, and stigmatise well-being concerns.”* ⁴¹

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 2019.⁴² 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.”*