

Towards a Civil Society for Transformative Change

This paper is presented as a starting point for reflection and discussion. It is not intended to be a comprehensive or conclusive review of the current situation of civil society or community organisations working for transformative social change.

Statement of issues facing community organisations in their work for societal change.

These statements were developed by a group of community activists exploring a shared concern in regard to the barriers to effective advocacy currently faced by community organisations, and a shared interest to advance an agenda for strengthening a civil society for transformative change to progress social justice, equality, and environmental sustainability.

The statement of issues and statement of vision and values, have been prepared as a stimulus and starting point for a wider conversation across civil society.

Statement of vision and values for a civil society for transformative societal change.

1. Statement of Issues

This is a statement of issues identified as facing community organisations in their work for societal change.

1.1 External Issues

Community organisations operate in a **context of neo-liberal rationality and of a range of intersecting inequalities**. They are enmeshed in a wider field of power relations. Consciousness-raising is not happening, an alternative social analysis is not being explored, and a capacity for this is not being built. An accessible language has to be found to communicate this context and build a challenge to it.

The **political environment** is ever more sophisticated in its resistance to change, and in its co-option of ideas and forces for change. There can be a sense of progress made, only for the rug to be pulled out from under it.

There is an **ideological dimension**. Community organisations work to categories imposed by the state. Their language has been co-opted and tamed by funders. There is an ideological battle still to be engaged in. Community organisations need to mobilise ideological clarity, establish what they stand for and want, and develop their own materials for this struggle, using their own stories as counter-narratives.

The **policy arenas** available to community organisations are sanitised. Whether as part of committees, or by way of meeting politicians, or by way of making submissions, community organisations are not able to progress new outcomes. Community organisations are locked into the stranglehold of LCDCs/PPNs, despite the inability of these structures to deliver change locally. This has become a never-ending cycle.

There is tokenism evident in these policy arenas. Positive strategies can be developed at times through these, yet there is failure of implementation. It is hard to get heard. It is a struggle to engage collectively. There is an authoritarianism evident in that, those who push back can get pushed out.

Funding for community organisations is a barrier to advocacy. It is precarious, insufficient and at times does not reflect what needs to be done. It can be withdrawn with ease, involves organisations as service providers, and comes with controlling conditions. The state drives the agenda, through this funding, and imposes its understanding of community development. Funding defines what community organisations do, and makes them part of the system, almost a part of the public sector.

Governance and reporting requirements have community organisations on a treadmill, bureaucratising them, rendering them almost too busy to engage in social change. The risks in breaching governance become a means of control. Reporting and measurement tools, with their focus on 'value for money', distract the focus from what is needed.

People don't feel hopeful and can't see change as possible. Inequalities have deepened and the struggle for survival can preclude involvement in other activities. It is difficult to mobilise in such a context. Community organisations also don't have hope and can't see change as possible. There is frustration at the lack of progress, and that sense, that they held in the past, of building towards something, has been lost.

The pandemic shifted community organisations to focus on the individual rather than the collective. The momentum behind working collectively and getting people to seek change has been lost. It remains difficult to bring people together.

1.2 Internal Issues

The **ideals that motivate** community organisations can be compromised, lost or diminished. Organisations become corporate and bland, and are challenged to go back to their values and to hold on to their own definition of these values.

The **agenda pursued by community organisations** is under-developed. In particular it needs to include: a greater focus on alternatives to an economic system that reduces people to economic units and destroys the planet;

a deeper analysis of the power structures and how these need to be changed; and a deeper understanding of the role of societal culture and engaging with cultural change.

The **strategy of community organisations** needs to evolve. Actions taken lack follow-up and do not form part of a wider change strategy. There is a challenge to develop alternative strategies where current approaches are not leading to change.

Community organisations need to challenge power with power. In this, they need to be motivating people, mobilising such power and getting people to realise their power. They need to reconnect with activism and movement building. Where gains are made, they need to be recognised, defended and used for further progress.

Community organisations are characterised by **division and competition**. They don't meet together to talk, plan or strategise. Local/national links lack effectiveness. The call to come together and challenge the way things are for community organisations has not been answered. Activism needs to be connected across organisations and activists.

Shared reflective spaces to engage community organisations are lacking and time is not given to reflection. Community organisations need to create spaces for debate to look at solutions to the issues and barriers they face, exploring what to do differently.

Community organisations could take steps to **protect advocacy**, forming coalitions that manage inhibiting funding arrangements, or that serve as independent platforms for advocacy. There is a need to create and invest in such safe spaces.

2. Statement of Vision and Values

This is a statement of vision identified for how civil society for transformative change would organise and operate, and of the anchor values that might be shared by these organisations.

2.1 Vision of a Left Civil Society

A left civil society would seek transformative societal change, working from a common value-base and with a shared understanding of these values.

This left civil society would advance an egalitarian, environmentally sustainable, and socially-just society. It would do so in a manner that recognises the interconnectedness of these issues, and would pursue such a vision in a manner that gives priority across all of these issues.

This left civil society would be concerned with movement-building and creating spaces for movement-building. These spaces would seek to build collaboration and coordination across what is currently a fragmented civil society for transformative societal change, and would make appropriate and effective links with political society and other movements that align with its shared values.

2.2 Anchor Values of a Left Civil Society

In its pursuit of transformative progressive change, a left civil society is motivated by shared values of: **Equality, Ecological Sustainability, Community, Solidarity, and Radical Hope**. These values are interlinked and interdependent in motivating the vision of a left civil society.

In establishing our ambition in engaging these anchor values, we set out the following shared understanding of each value to ensure coherence in regard to engaging these values in the processes and initiatives to pursue our vision:

Equality

Equality of outcome for all involving: redistribution of resources; recognition of and welcome for diversity; representation for and empowerment of the diversity of groups and communities; and respect for and solidarity with this diversity across society.

Ecological Sustainability

A climate-friendly world, care for the planet and nature, and a sufficiency for all while ensuring lasting protection of the planet and its natural resources, through: a just transition and climate justice, restoration of biodiversity, mitigation of climate change, and an end to the drivers of climate disruption.

Community

Communal, collective, inclusive and cooperative perspectives and engagement, acknowledging interdependence and shared concerns to achieve change in communities and wider society.

Solidarity

Connecting and organising to address issues through collaboration, coordination and mutual support, overcoming siloed approaches and recognising that issues of equality, ecological sustainability and social justice have the same root causes.

Radical Hope

Belief that change is possible and what we do matters; embracing uncertainty; and pursuing a passionate engagement in the demand for and action on change, with attention trained on an equal, ecologically sustainable and socially-just future.

2.3 Organisations within a Left Civil Society

Organisations within a left civil society would prize and give effect to autonomy and independence and would be values-led in pursuing their priorities.

They would assert an equality and human rights perspective as a foundation stone for their work, take steps to engage and defend their values, redefine the range of work they are involved in through an advocacy lens, and create independent spaces, as needed, within which to give full effect to their advocacy.

They would be bold in the pursuit of transformative social change, contesting the vested interests that seek to maintain the status quo, and asserting and giving effect to the right to dissent.

They would advance the case for change with the 'persuadable/ moveable middle' in the community and across society, and would enable a community activism rooted in collectivity, solidarity and self-determination.

Such organisations would emphasise grassroots initiative, engaging people and communities in conversations and consciousness-raising about the current situation and its root causes, and mobilising, organising and taking collective action for transformative societal change, based on these shared values and the shared understanding of these values.

Such organisations would be committed to, and would invest in, ongoing learning and capacity-building, self-critique and reflection, and building solidarity to underpin their positioning within and contribution to a left civil society.

2.4 Creating Conditions for a Left Civil Society

Organisations within a left civil society would seek a funding model rooted in principles of autonomy, independence, responsiveness to needs, and a right to dissent.

Such organisations would seek a model of engagement with the state wherein they would have power and influence in meaningful decision-making.

Staff of, and those engaged with, organisations within a left civil society would take steps to assert and affirm the values and sense of social justice that first motivated their involvement in work for transformative societal change.

Contact:

Solidarity Network

Secretariat:

Damien Peelo

damienpeelo@gmail.com