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INSPIRING SCOTLAND

Rights in Action

Strengthening rights based approaches in campaigning organisations

March 2025



BACKGROUND

Rights in Action is a project working across Scotland to support communities to use human rights as a tool for change. Rights in Action is funded by the Scottish Government's Equality and Human Rights Fund, managed and supported by Inspiring Scotland.

The project has three workstreams:

- **'Know Your Rights' workshops** to raise awareness of how human rights can be used as a tool in the fight against poverty.
- **Action Learning Sets** to bring together community organisations and community members to identify actions to support rights realisation and combat poverty.
- **Participatory research projects** enabling community researchers to generate learning on the overlaps between human rights and intersections of inequality and to undertake action.

The Poverty Alliance is Scotland's anti-poverty network. Together with our members, we influence policy and practice, support communities to challenge poverty, provide evidence through research and build public support for the solutions to tackle poverty. Our members include grassroots community groups, academics, large national NGOs, voluntary organisations, statutory organisations, trade unions, and faith groups.

The Poverty Alliance is recognised as a charity by the Inland Revenue.

Reference No: SCO19926.

www.povertyalliance.org.

Disclaimer: The views in this report are those of the researchers and the action learning participants and opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the Poverty Alliance or our members.

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WHAT WE DID

Over 6 sessions, national campaigning organisations came together to explore how to embed the PANEL principles (participation, accountability, non-discrimination and equality, empowerment and legality) further into their work, using the Action Learning methodology. We first came together in September 2024 to undertake human rights training. We then met 5 more times, with each meeting corresponding to a PANEL principle. Alongside these meetings, The Poverty Alliance hosted a webinar series on the PANEL principles, bringing together experts from academia, the third sector and people with lived experience of human rights breaches to share learning from their work and campaigning. Each learning event corresponded to a set meeting.

Over the project participants explored issues that they were facing in their work including how to:

- improve the representativeness of participation work across their organisation;
- support continued engagement from people with lived experience in the face of 'broken policy promises' from Scottish Government;
- influence and persuade Scottish Government to bring forward a delayed Bill;
- stand alongside people with lived experience to influence and persuade Scottish Government to take further action to tackle deep child poverty, in the context of tight Scottish Government budgets;
- ensure that an upcoming report captures the experiences of some of the most marginalised people within a minority group;
- develop a robust evidence base about minorities experiences of minority groups and push for those to be reflected in official data collection;
- sustain or maintain equality networks;
- develop a project that takes a human rights based approach to supporting marginalised groups into electoral politics;
- empower a minority group to name and claim their rights and to challenge decisions that impact them in housing, health and employment;
- ensure their organisations acts as an ally to communities;
- support communities to go beyond simply naming their rights to actively empowering them to claim them, particularly around access to an essential public service;
- develop Know Your Rights work to support people to challenge discrimination in the workplace, including supporting people to understand and take on employment tribunals.

WHY DID WE USE THIS METHODOLOGY?

Action Learning is a participatory approach that centres meaningful action. It is a methodology that involves a group of peers working on real problems they are facing in their work, identifying and taking actions, and learning as individuals and collectively. The Poverty Alliance had used Action Learning to address complex issues prior to the work undertaken in Rights in Action, and we found it to be an effective way of addressing complex systems and to bring about practice change.

“the purpose of action learning is to learn through devising solutions and strategies in response to problems and implementing them through deliberative action”¹

This report is about the third Action Learning Set that has been delivered as a part of Rights in Action. The aim of this workstream was to bring groups together to analyse, understand and plan action to address poverty using a human rights lens. The first set brought together community organisations from across Scotland, and the second brought together community organisations working in predominantly remote and remote rural and island areas. This set brought together national campaigning organisations to support them to take a human rights based approach to their work.

Learning and evaluation from previous Rights in Action Action Learning Sets highlighted:

- Learning is deepened when more time is put aside for organisations to explicitly map their work to internationally defined rights, UN articles, and human rights principles.
- The importance of making consistent and explicit linkages to human rights in terms of key articles, the principles of taking a human rights based approach, and the tools that support us to do this.
- Set members really valued the learning component that we added into the second Action Learning Set of the project.

This learning shaped this phase of the project. We created time in the initial training for each set member to do some individual reflection on the ways in which human rights interacted and intersected with their work. Having each set relating to a PANEL principle and to a corresponding learning event was introduced to ensure there was targeted and consistent linkages to human rights principles throughout this phase of the project.

Anonymity is a core underpinning principle of action learning. As such, all case studies are anonymised, and not all issues explored, actions taken or outcomes are recorded in this report.

¹ Ashton, S. 2006. Where's the action? The concept of action in action learning. Action learning: Research and Practice 3, no. 1, April 2006, 5–29

CASE STUDY ONE: EMPOWERMENT

How can I work to empower a minority group to name and claim their rights and to challenge decisions that impact them in housing, health and employment?

This national organisation works to challenge discrimination and advance the rights of a minority community, engaging with and informing the communities for which they work. The set member explored how their organisation could empower community members to be able to name and claim their rights, particularly to challenge unjust decisions around housing health and employment. They acknowledged that human rights can feel distant to those who are facing marginalisation, and that it is also an area with a lot of constitutional complexity – with some rights in international law that just are not experienced by communities on the ground.

Barriers to the community being aware of their rights were identified as: people not feeling supported by the state; mistrust in public institutions; accessibility and knowledge of human rights; confidence; and the need for broader social change and the development of an inclusive, human rights culture.

Throughout the set they explored ways to ensure that human rights information and resources reach the community, as well as what the goal of this work would be.

They outlined that they wanted their work to support both individual advocacy and collective bargaining, and that they could raise awareness of this work through community events, rallies, empowerment sessions or running structured programs on human rights, if funding was available.

Actions

The overarching action identified in this set was to speak to the wider team and think about what more the organisation could do around providing information on human rights. As a result of this, it was decided the organisation would take the learning from the set and embark on creating a human rights hub to be used by the community, to support people to learn about their human rights, and provide resources on how people could use them to challenge unjust decisions and as a tool for change.

“We also have this new idea of a human rights hub that will be something that will benefit us organisationally but also benefit the community members that we work with.”

“This is not just about a guide or a resource that might not be read on the website or might not be used. But actually, OK, here's some advice. We can't give legal advice, but we can say this is how you would actually use this in practice. This is how you would try and make a difference with it.”

Wider Reflections

The set member reflected that exploring this issue had felt quite overwhelming in terms of the scale of challenge facing this minority group. However, thinking about the scale of the challenge quickly turned into motivation to ensure that their work supported people to use their rights to make a practical change.

A key outcome of the project for the set members was identified as building their organisations capacity to take on practical human rights work, like the human rights hub project.

“Building our capacity to engage in and work on practical human rights work in Scotland. So whilst we're already doing human rights work, I think this has been an additional layer to that. It's provided new insights, new motivation and new discussions.”

CASE STUDY TWO: PARTICIPATION

How can I improve the representativeness of participation across my organisation?

Actions

A children's organisation with national reach, providing services and engaging in policy and campaigning work, explored how the representativeness of youth participation could be improved. The organisation already facilitates a wide range of opportunities for young people to participate and emphasises the importance of listening to young people in their work. However, the set member noted that the organisation can face challenges in engaging with young people who are furthest from rights realisation. The main challenges in deepening engagement and participation are: resourcing; commissioners seeing participation as an add-on activity rather than something that should be embedded from the beginning, despite the passage of the UNCRC; local authority funding not being uplifted in line with inflation, despite expectations of service delivery remaining the same; and commissioners and the Scottish Government not building in adequate timeframes for meaningful participation work, particularly for work that engages with infants or disabled young people. The organisation already provides training on children's rights to staff and evaluates the work of the whole organisation annually through anonymised surveys and a review process.

The overarching action identified was to develop a specific plan to highlight key actions that need to be taken by the organisation to support deepened and more representative participation. To do this the set member:

- Aligned this work with the annual evaluation, using this to help identify actions for the organisation to take.
- Will pull data on who is currently engaging locally and nationally and identify key gaps in engagement, after the data returns from the annual evaluation.

“We're going to capture obviously quite a lot. The kind of data coming back is who are they engaging with, what are the opportunities are these internal, external, a mixture of both? How are they supporting? How are they overcoming barriers to young people participating, and ultimately, what difference does it make? Where is the feedback loop?”

Actions cont...

- Will utilise children's rights indicators and to align this workstream with wider reporting on Article 12 of the UNCRC.

“Article 12 has been designed around the Lundy model of participation, so the sections are built down in terms of space, influence, audience, etcetera. So the questions are focused around those around those areas.”

- Is considering whether there is a need for additional staff training on participation.
- Continues to build positive relationships with local authorities and raises the profile of children's rights consistently.

Wider reflections

Although the annual review was ongoing prior to the commencement of the project, the set member reflected that their learning in the set would continue to filter through into their wider work. The set member also reflected the utility of the process of action learning.

“These days, we don't tend to have the time to have a free space just to think about. You know, where are we at the moment? What are the main issues? And then to get all the perspectives on it, I think it was really beneficial to have that time and space and again the colleagues within the room you know having having different perspectives... the strong EDI link.”

They also reflected that they had appreciated the opportunity to reflect more broadly on human rights as a result of being part of the process.

“Having that opportunity to reflect more widely on human rights alongside children's rights and the UNCRC will be the big benefit of that and hopefully moving forward we will be continuing to have those discussions.”

CASE STUDY THREE: NON-DISCRIMINATION & EQUALITY

How can I ensure that an upcoming report captures the experiences of some of the most marginalised people within the minority group?

An equalities organisation working to challenge discrimination and advance the rights of a marginalised group has collected a large amount of data on the community they work with and for, as part of a larger piece of research. The set member explored how they could ensure that a report on the experiences of disabled members in this minority group reflects the experiences of those who are furthest from their rights and facing the most severe marginalisation. They are working under a limited budget and timeframe and want to ensure that people's voices are heard and that recommendations are developed that are actionable and will make a meaningful difference to people's lives. Throughout the set they explored ways they approach the research and engage with the community within these constraints, recognising that they had already collected a large amount of primary data.

Actions

Actions they identified, and took, included:

- Drafting a specific plan of engagement around the report, how to classify recommendations and outline the process for developing recommendations.

- Exploring how human rights framing can be used in the reports and in the development of recommendations.
- Looking through the existing data to see what information they have and what is missing.
- Carrying out a scoping exercise to explore policy recommendations made by disabled persons organisations.
- Engaging with disabled people's organisations to discuss the data and the research more broadly.

“We have started to have more in depth conversations with people from DPOs, which has been great.”

Initially this set member considered hosting more focus groups bringing together disabled members of the minority group, but the organisation decided to use the preexisting primary data they had collected to shape the bulk of the report due to time and budgets constraints, and the depth of the data they had collected.

The set member reflected that even though they didn't go ahead with the focus groups having the 'big expansive' view of the set was extremely helpful.

“I think like the most helpful thing was just being able to really exhaustively talk it through and to explain it all and put it into words and have that be challenged and expanded upon.”

In their final evaluation interview, the set member emphasised that being part of the project has had far reaching impacts on their work, and that the repeated engagement with human rights has supported them to integrate them more fully into their work.

“It has just made human rights something that I think about in like the forefront of the work that I'm doing, and I think focus on focusing on it really specifically over and over again once a month for several months has just been really helpful in giving me enough experience and practice and understanding of how it works.”

“They've [the sets] all had big impacts on my kind of like general approach to work and thinking about what kind of work needs to be done now and who could support with that.”

IMPACT

An evaluation interview was conducted one to two weeks after the final set meeting. Five of the six set members were interviewed. Many of the timelines for actions identified in the sets span months and years, and therefore their full impact is unable to be captured within current project timelines. However these interviews did capture a variety of immediate impacts of the project, which have not been outlined previously in this report. These include:

- An equalities organisation reporting increased engagement with children's rights based approaches and arguments in policy and campaigns work.

“The point on the UNCRC and the parental rights angle is one that was brand new for us.”

“It definitely helped to talk through it, and particularly the question about the children's rights impact assessments, and building relationships and sort of getting the message out there.”

- A set member increasing their understanding of accountability gaps in the provision of an essential service and developing a plan of how their organisation is going to work to address this.

“There's nowhere anyone can go to sort of enforce their right ... I find that interesting, having that specific realisation that you know, we're talking about a legal issue, the legal issue is the lack of accountability and the lack of processes to access that.”

- A faith-based organisation engaging renewed outreach and deeper coalition building around an injustice faced by asylum seekers.
- A faith-based organisation exploring how to centre allyship in their work, leading to a renewed emphasis on participation.

“It made me think about participation, you know, because that relates back to whether you're an ally”

- An equalities organisations planning to use human rights to shape their upcoming research and report.
- Increases in collaborative working.
- A set member reporting increased confidence talking about human rights with communities.

“I think if I'd like before doing the sets, if I'd have tried to talk to like the communities that we serve about human rights, I don't think like I would have been particularly convincing... But now I feel like much more confident and also that it would be a really like, helpful and worthwhile thing.”

EVALUATION

“I am not coming to the group with a list of pre thought out problems I am facing – I am finding that the group is creating space to think about issues that I am encountering again and again at work that I wouldn’t usually have the space or time to think about... it has opened a door I didn’t know needed opening.”

- All set members who took part in an evaluation interview (which was all of the group bar one participant) reported they were able to better integrate human rights and equality into their work as a result of taking part in the set, and many reported learning from one another.

“Having the, the diversity of different organisations, different, you know, different people in the room, is really beneficial.”

“It’s having that subject knowledge and familiarity with human rights and thinking about them more as an integrated part of my work.”

- Set members who already explicitly took a human rights based approach, or where their roles had a strong human rights focus reported that taking part deepened their engagement with the principles of taking a human rights based approach.

“I don't think it's changed the level or the degree of focus that is put on human rights and my work just because that's something that I was doing already. What I think it did do over the period was just sort of help to spark more questions, more thoughts and more ways of analysing how do we do that.”

“I think that the action learning set has been useful and broadening that existing remit that we have in the sense of being able to hear different angles from different participants on human rights inequalities issues and also angles that are not glaringly obvious.”

- All bar one set members who took part in an evaluation interview reported they felt more confident engaging with marginalised groups as a result of taking part in the set, with many citing they had learnt from one another, and they appreciated the strong emphasis on equality, diversity and inclusion in the group.
- The set member who did not report feeling more confident, due their preexisting knowledge base, highlighted how their actions from taking part in the ALS increased opportunities for engagement with marginalised communities.

“I would say it's increased opportunities for engagement with marginalised communities.”

In the final evaluation interview we asked set members to identify the most important outcomes for their organisation.

These were:

- A set member feeling more confident engaging with marginalised communities, and being able to do better work as a result.
- Making the decision to narrow their work to three or four core campaigns and working more deeply, rather than stretching staff resource too thinly.
- The fact a member of staff was able to go away and get external input into sticky policy issues being faced by the organisation. This set member suggested they may use the methodology as a team when they face similarly tough questions.
- Their organisations increased capacity to do practical human rights work. This was a key outcome reported by two set members.

“strengthening our ability to engage in human rights spaces and human rights works on a practical level in a practical sense.”

- Being able to learn from others in the sector.

“What I've been able to learn from people...You know in having that wider sense of some of the challenges and we're not alone, obviously. You know, there's plenty of organisations out there, individuals who are working around rights work on a daily basis.”

EXPERIENCES OF THE ACTION LEARNING METHODOLOGY

Set members valued the space created by the Action Learning methodology. In their evaluation interviews many set members cited how helpful it was to have the dedicated time to talk through issues they were facing at work and to receive advice from other set members.

One set member also reported that the dedicated time to talk something through boosted their confidence in their own understanding of the issues that they were facing.

“I think just the space to think through some of these topics... as I think all of the topics were things I once wasn't super certain of.”

Set members reported that the Action Learning Set was experienced as a place of camaraderie alongside being a place of challenge, where people were supported to ‘break down their environment’ and interrogate their own thinking and practice.

The relationships formed during the process, and through the methodology, were cited as an important outcome by all of the set members who took part in an evaluation interview.

“The opportunity, like just to connect with other organisations, but like you know, that's, that's something that was quite enjoyable.”

In their final evaluation interview, set members said they would recommend the project to other organisations.

“It's quite a unique programme, and I would recommend it to other organisations to do.”

LEARNING

The national campaigning organisations involved found the combination of human rights education and action learning methodology helpful, despite challenges posed by working in a fast-changing policy environment.

Previously, in Rights in Action, we have facilitated action learning sets with community-based organisations. The types of issues addressed in this phase of the project have been different to those explored in earlier phases of the project due to the very different remits of the organisations and the job roles of the participants, who mainly worked in roles relating to policy and campaigns. The work of this set was much more responsive to Scottish Government decisions, and this could mean that certain actions were not useful by the next set meeting. Even in the situations where this did happen, set members reported that they had still found it helpful to have had dedicated time to think through the issue, and that this was surfaced learning which could be taken forward.

Linking the sets to the PANEL principles was helpful to keep the sets focused.

Each of the 5 full day set meetings were linked to a PANEL principle. Prior to each meeting the Poverty Alliance organised an online learning event bringing together practitioners, academics and people with lived experience of rights breaches together to discuss the principle in depth.

This learning component was referenced the most in sets by those newer to the subject area. The clear focus on a human rights principle helped to keep the sets focused.

A longer project timeline can support deepened learning and practice change.

Previous Action Learning Sets in Rights in Action have lasted 12 months. Although the 6 month process has been impactful, the longer processes allowed set members to build on their previous sets and deepen outcomes in a way that was not possible in the shorter time period. Several participants in this 6 month process reported that towards the end the group were more confident in more strongly challenging each other and that this was experienced as very beneficial. Building trust, and developing a challenging, supportive dynamic can take time, and a longer project timeline supports this.