

AcPrac Case Study

# Facilitating Social Movement Learning on Human Rights: What Role for Participatory Action Research?

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FOR SOCIAL AND  
ECONOMIC EQUITY

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## About AFSEE

[The Atlantic Fellows for Social and Economic Equity \(AFSEE\)](#) at the LSE International Inequalities Institute is an innovative fellowship programme that is funded through a landmark grant from Atlantic Philanthropies.

AFSEE aims to build a community of changemakers whose work addresses social and economic inequalities across the globe, while supporting them in developing imaginative approaches to their work. Adopting an ethos of collective action, the programme encourages collaborations between a range of stakeholders, including academics, activists, artists, development practitioners, and policymakers.

## About the AcPrac Project

This case study is published as part of the '[Exploring the Potential of Academic-Practitioner Collaborations for Social Change \(AcPrac\)](#)' project. The AcPrac project has two key objectives: 1) to contribute to AFSEE's theory of change by exploring the conditions that are conducive to developing generative processes of knowledge exchange between academics and practitioners; and 2) to examine the methodological and epistemological challenges of researching inequalities, and particularly how the latter might be reproduced through the research process itself.

The project also makes theoretical contributions by reflecting on the drivers behind the collaborations that different stakeholders pursue and it explores the potential of collaborative research, as a methodology, in challenging knowledge inequalities and in decolonising research.

# Facilitating Social Movement Learning on Human Rights: What Role for Participatory Action Research?

## Abstract

This case study reflects on collaborative research with activists from mining affected communities in South Africa, conducted as part of the Atlantic Fellows for Social and Economic Equity programme. It discusses the methods we used to explore the question of social movement learning on human rights; the insights generated through them; and the opportunities and challenges of using participatory action research as a vehicle for facilitating collaboration between academics, practitioners, and activists.

## Introduction

This case study explores the opportunities and challenges of using participatory action research as a vehicle for facilitating social movement learning on human rights. It reflects on collaborative research with activists from mining affected communities in South Africa, which I carried out in 2019 as part of the Atlantic Fellows for Social and Economic Equity programme. The goal of the research was to contribute to the debate on the role of human rights in tackling inequality by decentring dominant forms of human rights praxis and, instead, learning from those engaged directly in redistributive struggles. The research was academic in nature, in that it informed my dissertation (a requirement for completing the residential track of the fellowship programme). However, it also aimed to advance 'movement-relevant' theory (Bevington and Dixon, 2005). This approach is based on 'dynamic engagement,' foregrounding the concerns of activists themselves in defining pertinent questions, carrying out research, and 'testing' its utility.

We found that human rights played a notable role in shaping the collective identity of local activists in mining affected communities. However, while the approach appeared credible and salient to local activists, it had not been influential in their framing to date. In general, they did not deploy particular interpretive frameworks, and instead sought to describe specific grievances, such as material needs or livelihood problems facing their communities (Corkery, 2022, p.378).

Local activists considered the lack of knowledge about human rights a major challenge in this regard. In fact, knowledge, overall, was a major theme in the research. Controlling knowledge was seen as an intentional strategy by those with power (including executives from mining companies, municipal officials, and government representatives) to disenfranchise people. Accordingly, knowledge production had been a key strategy for local activists to confront power. So, we looked at how local activists had approached learning more generally and what lessons could inform a 'radical pedagogy' for addressing the gaps identified in human rights knowledge.

Drawing on participatory action research methods, we explored the different ‘cognitive processes’ through which human rights shape the meaning local activists attach to their praxis. To do so, we developed an iterative process through: workshops that enabled participant observation and group discussion; documentation analysis; two rounds of semi-structured interviews; and a follow-up meeting with some of the local activists to share the findings. This piece reflects on how we used these methods to explore the question of movement learning on human rights. It outlines the insights generated through them, as well as the overall benefits and limitations of the collaboration. In doing so, it aims to identify recommendations for similar collaborations that seek to draw on participatory action research as a tool for human rights education.

### **Why Did We Collaborate?**

The collaboration took shape quite fortuitously. I was introduced to Mining Affected Communities United in Action and Women affected by Mining United in Action (MACUA/WAMUA) through the Fight Inequality Alliance, a connection made during the fellowship programme. I was interested in focusing my dissertation on South Africa, given the glaring paradox between the country’s widely celebrated constitution, which includes some of the world’s most robust provisions regarding socioeconomic rights, and its status as one of the most unequal countries in the world. My experience working in the country, to date, had been with NGOs, rather than social movements. Though, the fellowship encouraged me to think more creatively about how to move beyond the fairly linear ‘theory of change’ that underscores traditional human rights advocacy, which relies heavily on ‘formal’ accountability mechanisms, such as courts, parliamentary committees, and other national, regional and international oversight bodies. So, I was eager to learn from activists using a much more expansive repertoire of formal and informal actions in the pursuit of justice. With a disciplinary background in law, I also really welcomed the opportunity to consider these questions from a sociological perspective.

I see myself primarily as a practitioner, not an academic. However, much of my work involves research. This positionality was relevant for the collaboration in two ways. First, it made working in an academic context feel like less of a ‘leap’ than it might have otherwise; I was already familiar to a certain degree, with the theoretical and methodological concepts that shaped the research. Second – and more significantly – it indicated to MACUA/WAMUA that I had ‘something to offer.’ I was already familiar with, and had experience navigating, the process of designing and carrying out a project with a social justice aim and with activist partners.

MACUA emerged out of the South Africa Mining Communities and Allies Dialogue, which brought together 150 community delegates and civil society representatives in December 2012. As recounted by the movement’s leadership, at that time there was increasing activism in the mining sector, following the Marikana massacre: the killing of 34 mine workers when police attempted to forcibly disperse a strike at Lonmin mine. However, such activism had been largely dominated by

unions and NGOs. As a result, the issues being 'championed' had been fragmented and disconnected from community concerns on the ground, particularly the impacts of mining on people's health and wellbeing; the lack of economic opportunities created by mining; and the exclusion of communities in decision making. The need for women to self-organise – to respond to the gendered impacts of mining, as well as to patriarchy within the movement itself – lead to the formation of WAMUA in July 2013.

The movement coalesced around mass mobilisations and campaigns demanding that the interests of mining-affected communities be reflected in the development of relevant policy and legislation. After extensive consultations, a Peoples Mining Charter was adopted by MACUA/WAMUA in June 2016. The Charter provided a basis for engaging (sometimes collaboratively and sometimes confrontationally) with the Department of Mineral Resources and the Chamber of Mines. While these efforts helped the movement gain recognition, for the most part it did not translate into concrete outcomes. In 2017, MACUA/WAMUA shifted strategy, conducting social audits of the Social and Labour Plans (SLPs) that mining companies are legally obligated to produce in order to be granted an operating license.

When we were introduced, MACUA/WAMUA were in the process of formalising their leadership structures and officially recruiting members. As they entered this institutionalisation phase, they were faced with a number of challenging strategic questions around how to build commitment and cohesion within the movement. Collaborating with me presented a chance to address these questions, by bringing in extra capacity (in terms of human resources) to more systematically explore the opportunities and challenges facing their local activists in organising.

### **How Did We Collaborate?**

The philosophy underpinning the research drew from participatory action research. Participatory action research is a 'counter-hegemonic' approach to knowledge production, which seeks to replace the 'extractive' model of research with an empowering one, so that the benefits of the research 'accrue more directly to the communities involved' (Kendon, Pain, & Kesby, 2007, p.1). Recognising that those most excluded 'carry specifically revealing wisdom', it adopts an ontological perspective that sees people as 'dynamic agents capable of reflexivity' (Kendon et al., 2007, pp.9,13) and a 'dialogical' epistemology that accounts for the 'situatedness' of different subjects (Yuval-Davis, 2012).

Participatory action research is commonly used in the study of social movements, as scholars often share the concerns of their research subjects (e.g. Dawson & Sinwell, 2012; Langdon & Larweh, 2015). This brings a 'normative urgency' for knowledge that is not only oriented towards 'scientific theorisation,' but is also useful for 'societal intervention' (della Porta, 2014, p.3). As

Mukherjee et al. (2011) stress, knowledge only becomes 'really useful' for movements when it is 'assessed and critiqued through engagement with those with the "epistemic advantage" of oppression and struggle' (p.153).

Participatory action research can be used to different political ends, as demonstrated in Masana Mulaudzi's paper in this series, titled 'What Lies Beyond Participatory Methodology,' which explores this topic in more depth. However, generally speaking, participatory action research aims to facilitate flexible yet structured collaborative analysis, whereby the research process is typically cyclical. It was co-designed with the movement leaders through two initial planning meetings, during which we agreed on the goals and objectives of the research, reviewed the research questions, and set out expectations for how roles and responsibilities would be assigned amongst us. We identified two research questions: 1) how are mining affected communities organising to confront socioeconomic inequality? 2) how do they think about and engage with human rights in their organising? In framing the questions in this way, we were able to align around – and create space to explore – our mutual interests. For MACUAWAMUA, the second question was relevant, but the first was more significant. For me, it was the other way around.

The approach agreed was to invite local activists from three community groups to participate in the research. These groups were MACUAWAMUA affiliates and had been involved in the social audit of the SLPs. The movement leaders took primary responsibility for identifying these groups, guided by agreed on criteria that included ethical and practical considerations. The local activists that participated in the research were with three different groups: an environmental one, a faith-based one, and a women's rights one, based in the provinces of Gauteng, North West, and Mpumalanga, respectively. We used a small academic grant to compensate them for their time, in line with the movement's standard practices.

Participatory action research methods are varied and aim to be responsive to previous experiences of the research participants, to support them to engage on their own terms (Kindon et al., 2007). In this research, we collected and analysed data between May and July 2019 through an iterative process that involved: three half-day workshops (which enabled participant observation and group discussion, with the explicit consent of the participants), documentation analysis; and two rounds of semi-structured interviews, the first with local activists and the second with national leaders. The goal of this process was to accumulate a 'progressively more interpretive and analytical picture' (Mukherjee et al., 2011, p.155).

I developed the data collection instruments, with input from the movement leaders. The first was a facilitator's guide for the workshops, which included an icebreaker exercise and three creative group 'brainstorming' activities. These sought to prompt discussion about the why, what, and how of the group's activism. The second was a protocol for the interviews with community activists. I developed the interview questions around a first set of themes that we had identified during our initial planning meetings.

The 12 local activists interviewed were nominated by their peers at the end of the workshops, on the basis of their interest in, and expertise on the research questions, rather than their representativeness. The interviewees were all black Africans and, as shown below in Table 1, were split fairly evenly by sex. While they varied significantly in age, with a couple of exceptions, they had generally all been involved in activism for a few years or less. Most interviewees had lived in their community for many years, where they faced poverty and unemployment; only a couple had ever had jobs connected to mining.

Location	Men	Women	Total
Gauteng	3	2	5
North West	2	0	2
Mpumalanga	0	5	5
Total	5	7	12

Table 1: Local activists interviewed, by location and sex (author, 2019)

I facilitated the workshops and conducted the interviews, which meant the conversations were mostly in English. Three interviews were in isiZulu – facilitated through informal interpretation. Audio recordings of the workshops and interviews were transcribed and where, necessary, formally translated. In addition, I took field notes throughout the process. These notes documented meetings, recorded relevant conversations, reflected on impressions etc. Themes were extracted and coded to show how activists thought about the problems facing their communities and the strategies they believed could address them. This analysis revealed commonalities and contradictions in perspectives – within and across interviews.

Interviews with the four national activists presented – and then invited reflection on – initial observations from the analysis, through more searching questions about the movement’s praxis. Through these discussions, we agreed on a revised set of themes. I then examined how these had been addressed in literature from human rights praxis and social movement studies, zooming in on three interrelated themes: framing, identity, and learning. The third of these, which theorises the (often informal or incidental) ways knowledge is gained and shared in movements, is the focus of this paper. These are the types of cognitive processes social movement scholars see as important for helping activists to make sense of and give meaning to their reality. After incorporating this analysis, we held a follow-up meeting with some of the local activists to share the findings and hear their insights on how they might be useful, as well as to brainstorm potential ways to share them through non-academic outputs. These included a summary of the research findings for the movement and a co-authored blog reflecting on the collaboration.



## What Did We Find?

*‘When we have knowledge, we have all the power.’*

Knowledge was a major theme in all workshops and interviews. Specifically, controlling knowledge was seen as an intentional strategy by those with power to disenfranchise people and exclude them from decision making. A number of interviewees spoke about mining companies manipulating communities because they were not coming from an ‘informed place.’ As Interviewee F described, ‘we couldn’t show evidence as such and they made us look stupid’.<sup>1</sup>

Accordingly, knowledge production has been a key strategy for local activists to confront power. ‘We’ve got tools to engage’, noted Interviewee B, which ‘can bring the government closer.’ In Gauteng, for example, the community group had to explain what an SLP was to their local councillor, who started engaging with them afterwards. Interviewee A emphasised this:

*‘Believe me you, they themselves they were not informed – they had zilch, zero information until we broke the news to them. We are the ones who opened their eyes.’*

In particular, it has helped ‘demystify’ how decisions affecting them have been taken, revealing they are not as solid, or well-informed, as they might appear (Gaventa, 1991). An example quite a few interviewees gave was learning mining companies used consultants, who were clueless about community needs, to develop their SLPs. Again, this changed the power dynamic and opened up opportunities to engage with mining executives, municipal representatives, government officials etc. As Interviewee ‘A’ explains:

*‘When you come to them informed, they question themselves. They’re thinking ‘where do they get this information’ and they start shaking. Now they want to negotiate.’*

Knowledge also appears to have strengthened political consciousness among local activists and changed dynamics within communities. In describing the impact of the social audits that they had done on the SLPs, for example, interviewees said things like ‘people were shocked (...) it really opened their eyes,’ they ‘started to engage more and wanted to know more’, and they ‘started to gain more confidence.’

Social movements, it is argued, are ‘inherently pedagogical’ (O’Malley and Nelson, cited in Ahmed, 2017). In other words, through organising, activists gain knowledge that supports them to

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<sup>1</sup> All of the interview excerpts are from those conducted with local activists in May and June 2019.

critically analyse their situation and to increasingly build power to influence it (Holst, 2009). Gaventa (1991) offers a helpful typology for identifying approaches to building knowledge – all of which local activists were, or were interested in, pursuing.

The first approach he identifies is to gain access to and control over ‘official’ knowledge considered the ‘monopoly of experts,’ in order to leverage it or, in some cases, to contest its validity and legitimacy. As Interviewee E put it, we need to ‘gradually infuse our knowledge’ with that ‘inside the boardroom’ in order to be ‘on par’ with those ‘vultures.’ To date, the primary information community groups have obtained, with the support of public interest lawyers, has been SLPs. In the workshops, participants also discussed attempts to obtain administrative statistics, which they saw as important for evaluating public services; some groups had been more successful in doing this than others.

The second approach in Gaventa’s typology is to systematise or codify community knowledge by documenting it more formally. This emphasises the expertise of those with lived experience. As Interviewee D explained, this is important because stakeholders need ‘to understand the real challenges’ facing those affected by mining. Workshop participants were positive about the door-to-door research, which was part of the social audit, as a technique for doing this. Other techniques highlighted included their group meetings. Interviewee H is an example:

*‘What I love is that when I come to the meetings, we share things and sometimes it’s things that we did not know, or we were not aware of. Then someone will come with an idea. Then we continue to discuss and continue finding ways forward.’*

The third approach Gaventa identifies is to develop new knowledge, which is outside the community’s own experience, but helps interpret it. For example, a few interviewees highlighted the value of scientific expertise in understanding the environmental impacts of mining.

*‘Nobody knew that we were breathing contaminated air; people knew they were getting ill, but they always thought it is just illness.’ (Interviewee A)*

*‘They taught us that the rusts are different; if it is dark brown with something white, it means it’s those fumes.’ (Interviewee C)*

Techniques for this kind of knowledge production that interviewees shared included collaboration with experts, such as NGOs and public interest lawyers, through activities such as workshops and camps:

*'What we knew was to fight for what is right. Doing things according to the book? That is where MACUA came in. The enlightenment started then.'* (Interviewee E)

Local activists considered lack of knowledge about human rights a major challenge. Many interviewees highlighted human rights as an area they would like to learn more about, as Interviewee A explains:

*'It would be very much of value if people were informed about human rights. It would give them a platform of knowing themselves and understanding who they are and what they should do. ... It changes the way you perceive things, the way you see things, the way you think of things.'*

This was a surprising finding for movement leaders, given that human rights education had featured in the movement's activities. Nevertheless, it appeared that there were particular gaps in local activists' human rights knowledge, rather than general unfamiliarity with rights. As Nash (2015, p.743) emphasises, for human rights to be a useful approach, people must be able to conceptualise it 'in ways that are appropriate to help them overcome the obstacles they face.'

Indeed, many interviewees (and almost all from the women's group) conceptualised human rights as the right to say no. Interviewee J's intervention illustrates this, in their response, when asked: 'In your own words, what are human rights? What do they mean to you?'

*'To me, my rights mean that what I don't want, I don't want.  
So, it's about stopping things from happening?  
Yes.'*

This is sometimes described as a 'negative' conceptualisation of rights, because it defines what the bearer of a human rights obligation *should not* do. Relatedly, others highlighted how rights provide redress for mistreatment (i.e., when a negative obligation is violated). For example, Interviewee I shared a story about how she had advised a patient to make a complaint about a nurse at a health clinic, who had disclosed the patient's HIV status without consent.

Knowledge related to 'positive' human rights obligations, which define what the bearer of a human rights obligation *should* do, was a notable gap. Interviewee E unpacked this issue in detail in relation to the rights to water and sanitation.

*'Yes, ok, my thesis around water and sanitation [is that] we need to be realistic. ... [Y]ou can't fight for something that you don't know how to do. ... If we can capacitate people around water and sanitation, and the department that is relevant to that problem, I think it will be*

*easy to bridge the gap, because now the community understands what is needed to be done. ... [O]ne thing for sure, what I've noticed in the communities, when people know how to do something, they stop asking questions and they start doing it.'*

This gap makes it difficult to use human rights to analyse where problems lie in the 'structural points' as Interviewee G put it. This suggests local activists were not conceptualising human rights in a way that helps them overcome the most relevant obstacles they face, which helps explain why human rights was not a frame that local activists used in describing the challenges facing their communities.

In tackling this human rights knowledge gap, all three of the approaches to learning described above would be relevant. However, developing new knowledge would be key. As noted, collaboration with outsider allies was seen as important in initiating and supporting organising and, as a result, facilitating the learning process. Experiences with this type of collaboration offered important lessons for any future efforts to build human rights knowledge within the movement. However, as discussed further below, teasing these lessons out can be a challenge.

Nash (2015) identifies two models for understanding the relationship between local activists and outsider allies (focusing in particular on international human rights NGOs). The first model, she cautions, distorts community concerns, when outsider allies leave out aspects of people's experience that are too complex or too controversial, in an effort to attract support. The second model adds weight to their concerns, when allies associate their 'brand name' with or contribute technical expertise to the cause, but take their lead from local activists, rather than setting the agenda. Overall, it appears that for MACAU/WAMUA collaboration with outsider allies, including public interest lawyers and international campaigning organisations, has added weight.

Nevertheless, as Walsh (2008) emphasises, collaborations between outsider allies who are elite activists (a category that includes practitioners and academics) and local activists are not 'mini-utopias.' Rather, they are uncomfortable 'sites of friction' through which power is contested. In the workshops and interviews, local activists were generally much less critical of outsider allies than I expected them to be. As discussed further below, my own positionality likely influenced people's willingness to voice critical views if they did have them. Yet, there was certainly some evidence of this friction. For example, Interviewee E noted that 'we have seen people come and go' and 'have been robbed so many times.'

### **What Lessons Did We Learn?**

Power relations involved in collaborations between social movement activists in the global South and researchers from the global North, like me, are inherently hierarchical. For this reason, participatory action research typically involves long-term commitment, in order to establish relationships, build trust, and mobilise the community's interest. Because the research was a formal requirement for an academic programme, we only had six-months for this collaboration – a

comparatively short amount of time. This imposed a number of limitations on the research. Adopting the iterative process described above helped mitigate these, to a degree. More importantly, it taught us a number of important lessons about translating the principles of participatory action research into practice.

First, the community groups that we could work with were limited. Our workshops and interviews had to be conducted within the movement leaders' (extremely overstretched!) schedules. Due to this constraint, we had to reduce our amount of interaction with the local activists in the lead up to, and following, the workshops. It sounds obvious, but flexibility and agility were key in accommodating this limitation – not just for practical reasons, but also politically. For example: while we had two days scheduled with the group in North West, we learnt that we had to cancel our first day of engagements while we were en route, due to a funeral taking place within the community. So, we shortened the workshop sessions, in order to squeeze in a couple of interviews on the same day before heading back to Johannesburg. When it comes to the 'participatory' in participatory action research, I could see the risk of the perfect becoming the enemy of the good; insisting on a degree of participation that is not practically feasible for your partner can end up recreating an extractive dynamic.

Second, it was difficult to gain 'discursive access,' a term that describes translation across different mindsets and ways of thinking (Otto & Terhorst, 2011, p.208). Indeed, English was not the first language of most participants and fluency varied. More significantly, however, we had limited time to find a common vocabulary that would provide a common linguistic ground to explore complex concepts. For example, the workshops included a roleplaying exercise, with small groups pretending to give a presentation about human rights to a community meeting. The presentations and following discussion all stressed how human rights relate to tackling poverty, improving public services, and promoting development. Nevertheless, local activists typically found it difficult to explain what human rights were in their own words, sticking to quite broad statements and repeating key concepts.

The interviews were an opportunity to probe a bit deeper. However, because we needed to schedule these immediately after the workshops, we did not get the chance to debrief with movement leaders on what had come out of the workshops and how particular issues might be tackled most effectively in the interviews. I was aware of my own limitations; I struggled to break away from 'bigger' English – as one workshop participant described the complex vocabulary and formal language used by people with high degrees of education. At times, it felt like a strain to pick up patterns in the words and phrases that activists were using to describe different issues. This experience highlighted the importance of pooling different types of knowledge, revealing some of the practical ways to create space for the two-way, back-and-forth that is necessary in order to find common ground.

Third, group dynamics remained somewhat stilted at times. As noted above, we used the workshops as a data collection methodology because the format was familiar to local activists and would support them to engage on their own terms. Nevertheless, it was clear that there were varying

levels of prior (as well as mixed) experience with workshops. Differentials in gender, age, education, experience (some visible and others much less so) affected how participants engaged with me and with each other in each of the three workshops, in quite distinctive ways.

While the presence of an observer almost always changes the context being studied, the presence of someone like me, with the positionality of a 'wealthy foreigner,' undoubtedly has a particular effect. While no one said explicitly that was how they perceived me, some comments implied it. As such, it would not be surprising if some participants had the legitimate expectation (or at least hope) that participating in the workshop may facilitate access to resources in the future. This would have likely affected how they engaged with me and how open they were, particularly in critiquing the involvement of outsider allies. For others, I suspect, there may have been little incentive to actively participate, if there was no guarantee of any follow up activities.

As noted above, a key step in the research was to examine how the themes that emerged in the workshops and interviews had been addressed in the social movement literature. A key theoretical observation was the notable shift from structuralist to more social constructivist approaches. The former pays particular attention to how movements pool and deploy various 'resources' necessary for collective action (Jenkins, 1983), while the latter describes the subjective, social-psychological, and ideational factors explaining mobilisation (Hunt & Benford, 2008). To me, however, the experience of navigating interpersonal dynamics in the workshops and interviews reflects the continued relevance of structuralist approaches in understanding and thinking of how to navigate the power relations embedded within collaborations between movement activists and outsider allies.

That said, I do think we were able to a certain degree to minimise the very obvious power differences between us. From my perspective, a big factor in this was having what McKercher (2020) calls 'power literacy' and adopting the 'mindsets' of co-designing that the author identifies. These include: elevating lived experience, valuing many perspectives, practicing curiosity and hospitality, as well as learning through doing. This helped me 'match the energy' of the group, as one participant commented. Interviewee B told me I made the participants feel like they were 'top class.' Reflecting on this feedback, I would say that while fostering strong interpersonal dynamics among the group is, of course, not sufficient to dismantle systems of oppression, it is necessary. Unless people feel seen, heard, and valued, it is impossible to build trust.

### **What Impact Did We Have?**

The research showed that a different set of questions arise when the voices of social movement activists who are mobilising to challenge the concentration of power are brought into the debate about the transformative potential of human rights. While answers to these questions are highly context-specific, the sociological perspective they bring highlights gaps in, and makes an important

intellectual contribution to, the debate on the role of human rights as an approach to tackling inequality.

Our research also generated some important insights on how to build new knowledge about rights. Both local and national activists highlighted the importance of democratising knowledge, in order to reduce, as much as possible, hierarchies regarding who had ‘expertise.’ Local activist shared a number of ways they engage community members, such as breaking down information, using familiar examples and analogies, and avoiding ‘bigger’ English. National leaders identified a number of key challenges for ‘scaling up’ the learning process across the movement, noting how community members may rely on specific gatekeepers for instance.

Interviewees stressed that human rights need to be presented in a way that is ‘not abstract,’ ‘foreign’ or ‘removed’ from lived realities, as this can undermine people’s confidence to articulate rights in a way that they feel comfortable with. As one of the national leaders put it: it’s important to avoid ‘spoon feeding,’ otherwise ‘we’ll just be saying human rights, equality, and whatever – without a clue what we mean.’

For local activists, addressing immediate material needs or livelihood problems facing their communities is crucial in building and sustaining trust, which they do with extremely limited resources. Some described themselves as social workers, or as filling a gap in the provision of social services. Interviewee A is an example:

*‘We try to solve whatever problem comes our way. ... So, we engage, we get in, we help. ... We don’t do the mining side only or the mining affected community thing only; we do community work as a whole.’*

This ‘concrete particularity’ needs to be connected to, and not lost in, general principles about human rights (Mukherjee et al., 2011).

This statement echoes scholars who call for a radical pedagogy for human rights education (Coysh, 2014). Human rights education is not inherently empowering; it become so when its purpose is ‘to agitate for the disruption of power relations’ (Ahmed, 2017). This requires shifting from a ‘declarationist’ to a ‘critical’ pedagogy (Keet, 2015). While the former is no more than a ‘regurgitation’ of universal norms, the latter is rooted in everyday struggles; through the creation of new knowledge, it supports people to, themselves, critique the conditions that make violations of their rights possible, to illuminate and legitimate new political strategies (ibid.).

Nevertheless, it was the ‘action’ element of participatory action research that was the most constrained by the time limitations we faced in this collaboration. The workshops included a pedagogical element. We shared analytical tools, including power mapping, for example. In the follow-up meetings, activists indicated they had incorporated these in their work. But, at the time, we weren’t able to design and test a specific intervention incorporating human rights into the praxis of

MACUA/WAMUA activists that would enable a more in-depth exploration of the strategic value of human rights in organising. This is something we're now finally returning to do now, in late 2022. In so doing, we're drawing on a number of key learnings from the 2019 research.

### **Looking Ahead: Developing a Radical Pedagogy for Human Rights Education**

Overall, the participatory action research approaches we drew on for the collaboration enabled us to produce 'movement relevant' theory. We found that human rights played a notable role in shaping the collective identity of local activists in mining affected communities. It appeared to be credible to local activists and there was real interest amongst them in addressing the human rights knowledge gaps identified. However, the approach had not, to date, been influential in their framing.

Importantly, the research also revealed key insights about knowledge production and highlighted a number of key considerations in thinking through how MACUA/WAMUA might develop a radical pedagogy for human rights education. In late 2022, MACUA/WAMUA established a partnership with the Center for Economic and Social Rights, where I work. We are currently in the process of designing and testing a specific intervention to explore the strategic value of human rights for organising in more depth. It took over three years for the 'stars to align' (specifically time, funding, and people) to pick up the collaboration again – thought the COVID-19 pandemic was certainly a factor in the delay. The 2019 research has offered important lessons about navigating power relations between social movement activists and outsider allies, which has informed how we are approaching the co-designing of educational materials on human rights.

As this case study showed, these collaborations are not without complications. In particular, there is the risk that they affect how knowledge is distributed within the movement and the possibility that they incentivise gatekeeping or other actions that reproduce power imbalances. To mitigate this, we are experimenting with models for participation that are 'right sized' for the practical constraints facing local activists and national leaders; emphasising the intellectual work that activists put in to make the complex concepts being explored mutually understandable and contextually meaningful; and being aware of and sensitive to how the flow of resources (both financial and non-financial, as well as current and potential) affects relationship building.

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