AcPrac Case Study

Academic-Practitioner Collaborations: Reflections from the Northern Irish Context

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Atlantic *Fellows* | 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.

Academic-Practitioner Collaborations: Reflections from the Northern Irish Context

Abstract

25 years after the Good Friday Agreement, inequalities from the past persist across indices relating to poverty and access to social housing. This reflection piece considers the work of Belfast-based human rights organisation Participation and the Practice of Rights, and the challenges and opportunities involved in implementing a grassroots human rights-based approach to change through academic-practitioner collaborations. The paper reflects on the need for a more conscious approach to collaboration, to avoid replicating the patterns of dysfunction that are evident in the governance of our divided society.

Introduction

'The longer I'm in the practice of building a movement, the more I realise that movement building isn't about finding our tribe - it's about growing your tribe across difference to focus on a common set of goals.' (Alicia Garza, The Purpose of Power, 136)

Image: Campaign Placard from PPR campaign on the Right to Housing, entitled 'Equality Can't Wait', photographed at Belfast City Council. Credit: Nicola Browne

To effectively address the scale of inequalities and injustice we face today requires social justice activists to work in collaboration, broadening and building out our circles of influence, support and expertise. Yet, the differences that make these collaborations essential and valuable also bring tensions. Collaborations between different actors in the social change world are replete with disparities in power, knowledge, financial resource, time, and motivation - and there is rarely a road map to effectively navigate these.

As a practitioner with 15 years of experience in grassroots human rights and campaigns work in Northern Ireland, this reflection piece will provide a practitioner perspective on how academic collaborations were used in my work to progress change. Using examples from my work with grassroots human rights organisation Participation and the Practice of Rights, I will consider the tensions and opportunities arising from academic-practitioner collaborations to support grassroots work to tackle inequalities in post-conflict Northern Ireland, and how they can be addressed.

Why Does This Issue Matter?

It is hard to underestimate the scale of the need for systemic change on a global scale. Globally we face deepening social and economic inequalities, expressed in the starkest terms by the fact that the wealth of the world's 10 richest men doubled since the pandemic began in 2020, while the incomes of 99% of humanity are worse off because of COVID-19 (Oxfam, 2022). The resulting impacts on our health, security and social cohesion is damaging our faith in democratic systems of governance. Climate breakdown is accelerating with particularly severe impacts for communities in the Global South, who have contributed least to the rampant consumption and monetisation of our earth. Across Europe, the far-right is capitalising on the divisions and conflict wrought in our society and has taken power in countries such as Sweden and Italy, with the election victories of the Sweden Democrats and the Brothers of Italy.

Closer to home, 12 years of Conservative government has delivered the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union, against the democratically expressed wishes of two nations of the UK - Scotland and Northern Ireland, both of which voted to remain (BBC News, 2016). Recurrent regressive tax cuts and spending decisions are hitting public services hard, and exacerbating inequality in a society which has the second highest income inequality of any OECD country in Europe (Dorling, 2022, 378).

This reflection piece focuses on work carried out in Northern Ireland - a region of the UK which experienced violent conflict between 1968–98 when the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement was signed. For many in Northern Ireland however, the patterns of the past persist. Official

statistics show that the top 20 most deprived areas in Northern Ireland are dominated by North Belfast, West Belfast and Derry - much as they have been for the past 40 years and more (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2017).

Examining academic-practitioner collaborations is important because the issues we face are urgent, and the potential benefits of such work are significant. Change cannot simply be left to government and political parties. Across Northern Ireland's higher education institutions - Queens University and University of Ulster - academics are working to address housing inequality, poor mental health services, a lack of reproductive rights, and climate breakdown – namely through research on viable policy solutions. Within activist spaces and civil society at large, groups and organisations draw on different methods that include strategising, organising, and campaigning, to work towards the same ends. Addressing social problems using a diversity of approaches is key to real social change. If we are to be successful in our struggles for social justice, it is imperative for academics and practitioners to be able to work together effectively; to discuss, challenge and shape ideas of how we tackle inequality and achieve progressive change.

Through the work examined below, this piece offers a deeper understanding of academic-practitioner collaborations. The term 'practitioner' is a broad one within the social justice context, potentially encompassing lawyers, policy analysts, and campaigners. This piece focuses on the work of Participation and Practice of Rights (PPR) (Marshall et al, 2014, 341); a new model of human rights organisation established in 2007 in post-conflict Northern Ireland, which has since inspired the work of other organisations like Making Rights Real and Just Fair.[1]

Reflections outlined below are a way to consider the challenges and opportunities between academic and practitioners involved in bottom-up campaign work, in what was initially a project with a participative approach to advocacy and human rights. It considers how these tensions can be reflected between practitioners and directly affected groups. This kind of work is still unusual in the human rights field in the Global North, and as such is less examined. My role in PPR focused on developing research and policy work to support the campaigns of groups directly impacted by issues such as poor housing or inadequate mental health services. This sits in contrast to the objective of much NGO-based policy and research work, which tends to be more government facing, such as consultation submissions, lobbying reports, and political briefings.

This piece will begin with an examination of the PPR's work before going on to consider differing understandings of what constitutes knowledge and epistemic injustice, including varying theories of change that academics and practitioners adopt. The paper examines how the learning

[1] For Making Rights Real, see: https://makingrightsreal.org.uk/ and Just Fair: https://justfair.org.uk/ (accessed 24 November 2023).

process unfolds between them, in order to deepen understanding of the barriers to effective collaboration. Finally, the piece will consider how these barriers can be addressed, such that academic-practitioner collaborations can fulfil their change-making potential.

Participation and the Practice of Rights (PPR)

Traditionally, human rights advocacy has tended to deploy the tools popularised by Amnesty International and other international human rights organisations. For example, 'evidence' reports, legal tools, as well as the use of mechanisms set by the United Nations. This methodology has been critiqued for reducing those directly impacted by rights violations to passive sources of information and victims of injustice, rather than being recognised as agents of their own change. PPR, where I worked from its inception in 2007 until 2018, was established to develop a model that responds to this concern by exploring how communities can use socio-economic rights as tools to participate in government decision-making and realise change in their own lives. Commenting on PPR's focus on participation in 2013, Mary Robinson, the former High Commissioner for Human Rights and the former President of Ireland, described it as 'the way human rights work should be, but isn't, done.'

The organisation was set up as a pilot demonstration project. It was distinctive at the time not only in Northern Ireland, but in the wider UK and European human rights field, for its work to operationalise a human rights-based approach[2] that employs organisers and community development workers alongside policy staff to work in communities. It supports them to use community-based action research to identify and measure the extent and nature of rights violations they experienced. In order to address ongoing societal inequalities in the communities most impacted by the conflict, PPR focused the right to adequate housing, to the highest attainable standard of health, and to decent work, as set out in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (UN General Assembly, 1966, 3). It worked in North Belfast, where inequality and social deprivation was hitting particularly hard. The aim was to support and equip local communities to use their action research to identify local violations of global human rights standards, and then to monitor and campaign for their rights to be realised. A key part of the organising work done with communities aimed to address the personal stigma and shame attached to poverty, by highlighting the role of institutional power in making decisions that overlooked their needs and did not help them obtain their rights.

[2] See Scottish Human Rights Commission: https://careaboutrights.scottishhumanrights.com/whatisahumanrightsbasedapproach.html [Accessed 14 December 2022])

Epistemic Injustice

A key issue in academic-practitioner collaborations is how the value of the knowledge and research shared by each partner can differ; knowledge derived from traditional educational institutions is often more highly prized in society than the knowledge generated by communities, through their direct experience of how governance systems interact with those they are duty-bound to serve. Indeed, in mainstream human rights theory, the role of communities and social movements is overlooked and not valued when it comes to the creation and evolution of human rights norms and standards.

As Neil Stammers describes the field of human rights as treaties and laws that are often in line with western modes of thinking, which seldom incorporate knowledge and learning from social movements.

> *‘Upreda Baxi has argued that since the end of the Second World War, it has been the poor and oppressed of the world who have been the hidden authors of new forms of human rights, and this aspect of Baxi’s argument fits with my own contention that the longer and deeper history of human rights indicates that institutional and legal processes should be seen as the outcomes of the history of human rights, not the origins of that story’* (Stammers, 2015, 73)

This translates into PPR’s work in communities being perceived as novel and interesting, though sometimes not as legitimate human rights work. Indeed, PPR was acutely aware that the experiential knowledge of the group was liable to be disregarded, particularly by decision makers at the local level who are responsible for implementing and achieving the goals of a human rights agenda. One of the initial academic-practitioner collaborations I experienced as a PPR member, was around an event planned by the organisation to launch the campaign of a group of young women who lived in a run-down tower block in North Belfast, and who had carried out action research to show how its living conditions violated their housing rights (PPR, 2013).

Action-oriented research such as that carried out by PPR and the groups it works with differs in many ways from conventional academic research. The research consisted of a survey of the 400 residents of their tower block, of which 70 responses were received to a survey designed by the residents with some support from PPR staff. Its scale and methodology, being carried out by those who live there, would certainly not have passed ‘objectivity’ tests required by academic standards of research. Yet, the research was part of an overarching goal to achieve

practical change and disputed the view of action and research as oppositional activities (Dreze, 2017, 5). It rejects the idea that academic knowledge represents 'objectivity' as a sign of quality and validity and the experience of communities is merely 'anecdotal.'

Regardless, as a team we decided to seek out local and global academics to attend the campaign launch event and present their academic knowledge and research to 'validate' the action research carried out by the residents. Seeking out high profile academics to do so was a strategic move, not only to validate and consolidate the group, but also to help affirm and solidify the organisation's emerging methodology at the time. The academics approached were aware of this strategy, and contributed to it in good faith, with full support for the work this group of women in North Belfast were doing to improve their housing conditions. They were also curious about the new, local community application of global human rights standards, often criticised for being remote, irrelevant and overly technical. Yet in so doing, this collaboration did little to challenge or dislodge the higher value placed on academic knowledge. Instead, it reinforced it. PPR staff also authored articles for academic journals (McMillan et al, 2009) for the same purpose - to shore up the work, and the group's campaign. There is a need to challenge the privilege granted to academic knowledge over experiential knowledge. However, in this collaboration, the choice was made to focus on persuading academics to use that privilege to confer acceptance and approval of a directly affected group's experiential knowledge.

Theory of Change

Perceptions and theories of how social change occurs is often different among academics and practitioners. Sometimes in academic writing, there is little evidence of a theory of change at all. In research as part of my LSE and Social Change Initiative Fellowship, I was regularly struck by the tendency of well-thought out, valuable papers ending with a conclusion which was little more than an unrealistic wish list requiring a list of decision-makers - from the United Nations, to local government etc. to do more or better, but with little consideration of how that might actually happen in practice.

Dustin Kramer, an activist from the Social Justice Coalition (SJC) in Cape Town, South Africa has written about their budget advocacy work, outlining how facts, evidence and data can be seductive. Initially SJC focused their budget advocacy work on winning the argument over facts, before eventually understanding they could not win on those terms and winning a fight over the 'truth' would not mean much. As Kramer says:

> *'Trying to win an argument, without finding the leverage to actually challenge power, could never be a winning strategy'* (Kramer, 2017)

It's my contention that we cannot rely only on the quality of our evidence or cogency of our arguments to realise change. Activism requires developing and working from a theory of change - a strategic framework resulting from an analysis of power, strategy and tactics to move towards the outcome one seeks. Theories of change are part of the campaigning lexicon, and as such are often explicitly discussed, articulated and revisited within an activist group. They are often derived from an analysis of power, and an acceptance that as activist groups aiming to disrupt the status quo you have significantly less power than state or corporate institutions you are demanding change from. Both from my own time spent in human rights academia, and my work in coalitions with academics and practitioners, a developed theory of change is often less evident among academics than practitioners. Academia, as an institution of the state, in receipt of state funding, can seem to have more in common with government and its departments and commissions. Activists and practitioners on the other hand have different structures and smaller budgets. They often do not seek or accept state funding in order to preserve their independence – both in how they are perceived, as well as how they operate. When I worked as an academic researcher, it was evident how many colleagues acted in accordance with an 'insider' theory of change - arising from an affinity with government, or at least from a lack of attention to the power differentials that exists between one party lobbying for progressive, practical policy changes, and another representing the political, state, or financial power of the status quo. However, this dynamic can manifest in an over-reliance on high quality data, and well evidenced arguments, rather than power-informed strategising and analysis, to tease out how actions will lead to the desired change. Activist Ben Phillips has spoken of what he terms the 'evidence-based paradox,' that requires that we are evidence-based in our proposals for change, despite the dearth of proof showing that change comes from decision makers being shown evidence. (Phillips, 2021)

Laurence Cox (himself an academic and a practitioner, based in University College Cork) states that theories of change in academia tend to have:

> *'A weak vision of a better world with no serious attempt to reflect on what forms of social movement struggle might be capable of bringing this into existence. This new utopianism is often just as reliant as the old on assumptions of enlightened despotism, routinely seeking to appeal to the powerful to abolish themselves.'* (Cox, 2018, 94)

The 'insider' theory of change held by academics may not have been consciously decided on. And yet there is much potential for 'insider-outsider' strategies working in tandem to reap positive results in campaigns. Sarah Schulman describes how Act Up deployed both strategies in their

work to hasten HIV treatments with the Act Up Treatment and Development (T&D) chapter carrying out citizen science work and negotiating with the US Food and Drug Administration, while other chapters led disruptive street protests:

> *'In these negotiations T&D used the executives' fear of the Outside, the ACT UP of women, radicals, and people of colour, the street activists who could turn out in large numbers and to whom the corporate men could not relate'* (Schulman, 2021, 207)

Baker et al underline the desirability of a 'dual strategy' that makes use of the strengths of both the radical activists, and the (perhaps) moderate academic - disruption, they state, succeeds best when it has allies operating within conventional structures of power (Baker et al, 2009, 241).

A further tendency with activists and academics may be that activists see themselves as more 'radical' pursuing more disruptive tactics and making more demanding claims, while perceiving academics as 'moderates' due to their role at the heart of the university, a key state institution. Insider theories of change can be alienating to practitioners who have a 'fixed' idea of what an activist should be i.e. a boots-on-the-street attender of protests, megaphone in hand. As such, in an academic-practitioner collaboration, academics may be less likely to identify as an activist in the sense of being part of a political struggle for social justice. Similarly, practitioners may become closed-off to the value and perspective brought by those working at a distance from the grassroots. However, the human rights movements, like others, should be valued for its diversity and its strategic pluralism should be seen as a strength. Activists must make efforts to move away from siloed or 'purity' thinking, where only direct action counts as valid activism. They should value and support different approaches, rather than be wedded to their own strategy as the only way to achieve change. Academics could be more conscious of how the requirement for their work to be 'objective' does not make it value-free, instead it often means adopting the values of the academy. This would go some way towards addressing beliefs around 'purity' on both the part of academics and practitioners which hinder the relationship and trust-building needed to build an effective collaboration.

Role of Funders

The process, dynamics, and outcome of an academic-practitioner collaboration is most often determined by the intention behind it. It risks being transactional and not being equally beneficial to each partner, particularly when the collaboration must satisfy the requirements of academic funders. PPR was involved in such a collaboration in its early years. As a condition for receiving an academic grant, the funder requested that our organisation be represented on the steering

committee. This was to ensure that the research remained grounded in real life experiences of communities directly impacted by violations of economic, social and cultural rights. Though after attending a start-up meeting at the academic institution, it became clear that further follow up meetings were not planned, or that PPR was not invited to them, even though the research was completed and published. This was a missed opportunity to work in, and learning from, a collaboration that integrated experiential and academic human rights research.

Upon becoming Co-Director of PPR in 2012, I also made decisions that felt uncomfortable to take. For example, I had to ask group members to spend time meeting with the staff of foundations, rather than focus their precious time on their own campaigns. Ebrahim points out that for many NGOS (PPR at that time would be no exception) they practice much more upward accountability with their funders, donors and tax authorities, than they do with their beneficiaries (Ebrahim, 2003, 819). This reflects the power dynamics inherent in the funder-organisation relationship. Many funders require functional measures of success based around project outputs – such as meetings, press releases, etc. These serve to provide only a functional view of the inputs and outputs of change-making work, rather than the complex mix of factors and interventions that lead to change.

If we are to build effective and open collaboration between academia and practitioners in the social justice space, it’s necessary for us to be explicit about the external forces which can detrimentally influence how we interact with each other.

Shared Learning

A huge potential benefit for academic-practitioner collaborations is the opportunity to share learning arising from the diversity of knowledge, perspectives and strategies employed by both in their work for social change. From a practitioner perspective, this is an exciting prospect. Working with communities directly and currently impacted by a denial of rights, often leads to an experience of work as ‘firefighting’ urgent issues that arise around housing or health needs of group members, who require immediate assistance or support. While it is obviously desirable for practitioners to keep abreast of academic writing in their area of work, in my experience it is unrealistic. Even where the will exists, the general inaccessibility of academic writing is also a factor - whether that be financial inaccessibility with journal articles locked behind a paywall, or the inaccessibility of the articles themselves, which tend to be written with an academic audience in mind. This generates a writing style that can be off-putting for others. However, where more relational

academic-practitioner collaborations can be forged, valuable academic knowledge that is shared with practitioners can have hugely beneficial impacts both on the practitioners and academics' work.

In the early days of PPR I experienced an academic-practitioner collaboration of this kind, which brought huge benefits to my work. I began working at PPR in 2007 in a Research and Policy Officer role. My work up to that point had been much more in the academic sphere. Having completed a law degree at the University of Dundee, I completed an LLM in International Human Rights Law at Nottingham University, and then went to work in the Centre for Capital Punishment Studies at the University of Westminster in a Postgraduate Researcher role. As such, my experiences around both learning and advocacy work in the human rights field had been within an academic set up until I joined PPR. Leaving methods of work that I was familiar with, such as research analysis, high-level lobbying, briefings and holding conferences and seminar series, was difficult. The innovative nature of the grassroots human rights methodology was exciting, but also unfamiliar and at times felt personally exposing. For example, I was given the responsibility to develop a way of using human rights indicators and benchmarks on the ground in communities to monitor human right compliance with international treaties. Human rights indicators and benchmarks (Office of the High Commission for Human Rights, 2012) had been developed initially as a tool for states, and to adapt them as tools for affected communities seemed like an endeavour that could be subject to scrutiny.

PPR was in many ways an organisation with no real footprint, attempting to deliver a piece of work that operated in a consciously different way to that of other human rights organisations. It was clear that working at PPR would require a very different approach; being creative with the international human rights framework, rather than simply applying it. This shift would have been much more difficult to make without the collaborative work of Dr. Judy Walsh, a member of the Board of PPR whose support was invaluable to staff's ability to identify the values and purpose of the work, long before the practical steps had been worked out.

Dr Walsh authored a reflection paper (2008) designed to identify the core values and features of a rights-based approach, capturing how the pilot stages of the work had put these into practice in communities. This paper articulated the concept of rights not as possessions, but as a tool for constructing relationships, to build the kinds of relationships between individuals and groups that we value. It highlighted that a human rights-based approach is concerned both with process and outcome. This means not only working towards material improvements in people's lives (e.g. a better standard of living, or health service) but also considering how the rights are realised, how the issue is identified, and how the delivery and implementation of rights occurs.

This exercise in conceptualising the theory behind a new activist approach and capturing the learning from the early stage of the work, was vital. My role was to lead the policy aspect of the campaigns, researching the international human rights standards, local policies relating to the issues raised by the groups (e.g. poor social housing conditions, or inaccessible mental health services) and assisting the groups in designing action research tools, and analysing the results they obtained. An academic partner, who had both knowledge of theory and practice about how human rights-based approaches should operate, played a significant role in helping me unlearn much of what I had previously held to be true in terms of human rights and epistemic value. The work done and shared by Dr. Walsh was critical for me and other staff. It helped us feel equipped to do creative human rights work with communities, while feeling grounded by theory and a conceptual framework. The role of academic-practitioner collaborations in communicating and disseminating theory to those who are mostly engaged in human rights practice, was underlined to me again through my AFSEE fellowship year, which provided an opportunity to read academic literature describing and conceptualising the work I had by then been carrying out in PPR for over 12 years. While communities devoted to practice can exist among activists to share experience and learn, not enough forums help enable academic learning that would facilitate conceptual and critical thinking by practitioners. For practitioners, being unable to imagine what is possible or to contextualise their work within a wider global context deprives them of opportunities to forge solidarity and to develop more effective systemic solutions to the changes we face.

Conclusion

This reflection piece has considered the work of PPR, a grassroots human rights organisation based in Belfast, Northern Ireland, and the dynamics of academic-practitioner collaborations which played out in the context of the organisation's work. It highlights how different challenges and opportunities arise through ways in which value is attributed to different sources of knowledge. The piece also considers different theories of change, external pressures from funders, and how these impact the sharing, learning and transferring of knowledge. It deepens understanding of academic-practitioner collaborations by focusing on the interaction between both parties in the context of a bottom-up campaigning organisation in post-conflict Northern Ireland -a context that is seldom examined for lessons around social justice collaborations.

Much is at stake when we try to build effective, equitable academic-practitioner collaborations. Each party has much to offer the other. We have seen how building time for generous knowledge transfer from academic to practitioner allowed emerging grassroots work to be conceptualised and articulated. Dr. Walsh's work gave staff a sense of the historical basis and

potential of grassroots human rights work, provided a framework and analysis that grounded us, as well as the psychological safety needed to experiment. Within the analysis she provided were principles and ideas that enabled the construction of a new methodology. Indeed, it is difficult to challenge the values attributed to academic and experiential knowledge when that academic knowledge is being deployed to build power behind a group seen as powerless. Insider and outsider theories of change can be a barrier to generative work. However, it can also be an opportunity if both academics and practitioners put aside their tendency towards methodological purity and accept that working together is what brings significant campaign victories. Additionally, the way in which power dynamics can be further complicated by the demands of external stakeholders, such as funders, can lead both academics and practitioners to shift their priorities from the group to organisational and institutional concerns. We also see how power dynamics between academics and practitioners can be mirrored in the dynamics between practitioners and affected groups.

What now? In writing this piece, I revisited old writings I have on participation. One that struck me described how participation is ultimately about power and control, consisting of a terrain where power relationships between several players and their priorities are contested (Cornwall, 2008, 110). It reminded me that in approaching collaborations, the motivation of those entering joint work is often a determining factor of their success. While it may be unrealistic to wish for each party to enter collaborative work with entirely altruistic motives, this does not prevent open and honest conversations taking place about the process to follow, the values driving it, and what it would look like in practice. My campaigning experience has been that issues need to be named and defined before they can be addressed.

This is a particular pertinent point in Northern Ireland's context, where naming issues such as structural Catholic disadvantage that Northern Ireland was built upon, can invite accusations of bias, or simply of being 'stuck in the past' - even as these patterns continue to persist. As last year marked the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, it struck me how little this example of a shared vision, and the leap of faith the 'Yes' vote required is truly absorbed as part of our narrative about this place, which we are much more likely to describe as 'dysfunctional' and 'hopeless.'

Can academics and practitioners then, working in the wake of this history and in this context, also strive to cross barriers of methodology and reach out to the 'other'? The relational approach outlined in the case study was essential to a meaningful application of learning and

knowledge. By creating spaces for sharing, in which there is an equal respect for the tools and methods used by practitioners and academics alike, we build more fruitful relationships and collaborations.

The privilege granted to academic knowledge could be addressed by universities adopting more person-centred approaches to human rights scholarship. For instance, by incorporating more focus on movements, strategy and power dynamics based on class, race, gender, sexuality, disability, etc. Encouraging the study, dissemination, and teaching of person-centred analysis of human rights in academia would also help the emergence of a different narrative around rights as a system originating from challenges that have been brought up by social movements. This emphasis could help influence understandings of the origins of law more broadly. Moreover, organisational leaders could be encouraged to allocate time for reflective learning with their team. This can serve as an opportunity for staff to stay up to date on relevant academic writing, while also opening up the opportunity to invite academics to present to the team and get them involved in building campaign strategy and using their power to amplify a group's experiential learning. This process can therefore be less transactional by including the academic partner into the strategy. In line with Dr. Walsh's analysis of rights as relationships, we should recognise the role human rights plays as a means of defining a culture of resistance, shifting people's self-image, and bringing together disparate groups (Baker et al, 2009, 77).

The irony of writing about effective collaboration in the post-conflict Northern Irish context - where the political system is defined by dysfunction - is not lost on me. The reasons for that are deep-seated, historical, and are regularly covered by academics, journalists, political commentators, and social media users. Yet, as conversations about the constitutional future of our island grow, examining how we can collaborate across differences, and being explicit about the challenges and opportunities in that work has rarely been more vital. How energising it would be if work to build the conditions for honest, inspiring and effective collaborations was led by social movement actors of all skills on this island? Andrea Cornwall reminds us that:

> '*Theory is sharpened by the discipline imposed by the need to connect it with practice, and practice becomes clearer as we seek to articulate its meaning more clearly in theoretical terms*'[3] (Cornwall, 2008, 112)

[3] *Op cit.* 22, p. 112

Academics, practitioners, and most importantly communities impacted by inequality and human rights violations have so much to gain by getting conscious and clear around our collaborative work.

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