

What can academics and activists learn from each other?



John Chalcraft leads the **Collective Action Forum**, an innovative project designed to bring academics and activists together. He argues that engaging with activists can help universities take a fresh look at the world's problems and make a positive impact on society.

Different ways of thinking

The LSE Department of Government's Collective Action Forum (CAF) started work in the 2016-17 academic year. It is a small-scale, innovative public engagement initiative, designed to bring academics and activists together for mutual benefit. The CAF is based on the idea that academics can benefit from interaction with activists in developing, disseminating and achieving impact for their research. Activists, in turn, can benefit from links with academics in enhancing their collective capacities to bring about or resist change.

The LSE has a strong and important tradition of public engagement. It has many initiatives linking policy-makers and the private sector to academics. Less developed, however, are vehicles to forge relationships and partnerships with activists in civil society. Yet, some of the most interesting approaches to contemporary social, economic, cultural and political problems are being developed in non-state settings. Such approaches can sometimes be more daring and creative than those pursued by large-scale, centralised, and status quo-oriented political and corporate institutions.

Activists pose original questions and suggest unusual angles, connections, and/or solutions that can fertilise academic thinking. Their strategies and forms of knowledge-seeking are problem-driven and not constrained by disciplinary boundaries. They can also be intimately connected through their work with pressing challenges faced by large numbers of ordinary people, a practical experience that can help academics maintain contemporary relevance beyond the ivory tower and beyond the conventional assumptions that tend to guide the action of those in the corridors of power. In organising to promote or resist change from relatively powerless positions, moreover, activists are constantly running what can be viewed as real-world experiments, the diverse trajectories and uncertain outcomes of which are grist to the academic mill.

Impact through partnership



The Collective Action Forum is guided by the idea that knowledge exchange and impact strategies miss a trick if they only target existing power-holders. It proposes the vital importance of developing ways to generate impact in civil society in general and among activists, campaigners, and advocacy networks in particular.

Studies have shown that effective impact is often about effective partnerships at all stages of research. The CAF is designed to facilitate such partnerships, which can feed into research design, implementation and dissemination, especially where activist networks are leveraged by research projects. Quality partnerships with non-academic stakeholders can also help determine the form in which knowledge capable of having an impact is exchanged. We hope to be able to improve the quality and validity of information exchanged within activist networks, and develop activist strategy.

The United Nations Human Rights Council has pointed to academic institutions as safe spaces within which 'diverse views are expressed and challenged and [which] lend themselves well to partnerships with civil society that encourage creativity'. But universities have not always taken proactive steps to develop such spaces. Although of modest scale, the Collective Action Forum aims at taking a step in this direction. Activists, for their part, can benefit from exchange with universities by developing their strategic insights, making use of authoritative knowledge, accessing spaces and resources, and achieving visibility.

Engaging with contemporary challenges

The Collective Action Forum focuses its activities around pressing contemporary problems, themes and challenges. We are currently engaged on ever-more globally relevant issues of transnational advocacy and activism around rights and law, and in relation to the Middle East and North Africa, a region beset by multiple governance crises. We also take an interest in national rights, civil and political rights, social and economic rights, rights related to women, gender and sexuality, and cultural rights.

Led by myself and supported by the LSE Department of Government and its professional services team, the Collective Action Forum is part of the Comparative Politics Group and is interdisciplinary in orientation. We aim to build linkages across the School with the departments of **International Relations**, **International History**, **Sociology**, and **Anthropology**, as well as the **Centre for the Study of Human Rights**, the **Middle East Centre**, the **Institute for Public Affairs**, and the **Institute for Global Affairs**. In the non-academic world, we seek to build partnerships with human rights professionals (including lawyers and journalists), particular campaigns, unions, civil society organisations, NGOs, cultural workers, and individual activists.

Events as a catalyst for collaboration

Our first event, **Universal Jurisdiction versus Political Immunity: can states still get away with it?**, was held on Monday 28 November 2016. The event considered the question of whether, even in a globalised world, states can still get away with not holding perpetrators of serious international crimes to account. The focus was on the inter-state agreement made between Israel and Turkey to put an end to the adjudication of criminal and civil actions by victims of the killings and other serious violations aboard the Gaza Freedom Flotilla and Mavi Marmara aid ship in 2010.

This event was particularly timely as the High Court in Istanbul was due to adjudicate on the issue only days after we staged the event. In keeping with the aims of the Forum, the panellists included a leading British QC in the case, a Turkish human rights lawyer, the father of one of the victims, as well as leading activists and academics. The event was staged with support of Stoke and White LLP, a leading city law firm, Rodney Dixon, QC, and the Centre for the Study of Human Rights. It has helped to build ongoing partnerships within and beyond LSE, harnessing academic expertise in pursuit of legal human rights claims rooted in the region.



Our second event, **‘Truth for Giulio Regeni!’ Transnational Activism and Human Rights Violations in Egypt**, will be held on Thursday 2 March 2017. This event looks at the case of Giulio Regeni, the Cambridge University student who was tortured to death in Egypt in early February 2016, most likely by the Egyptian security forces. It asks hard questions about transnational campaign strategy, the repression of civil and political rights in Egypt, and European governmental complicity.



The event is timed to coincide with the anniversary of Giulio Regeni’s death, and coordinated with a number of other such events around the country, as well as the Amnesty International campaign on the issue. The panellists include leading campaigners in the case, an Egyptian human rights activist, the Regeni family lawyer, the mother and the father of Giulio himself, and academics in the field. The event is staged in coordination with the LSESU Italian Society, UCU, Egypt Solidarity, and Amnesty International, and will help to build partnerships going forward, linking academic expertise to campaign strategy and authoritative knowledge.

The Collective Action Forum will soon have a website to publicise events, disseminate podcasts, promote partnerships with activists and facilitate knowledge exchange. We aim to host at least two events in 2017-18, with one in particular focusing on campaigns for the social and economic rights of migrant workers in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, as interest grows in the run up to the World Cup in Qatar in 2022. If you would like to receive notice of events, or participate in some way, please contact either myself (J.T.Chalcraft@lse.ac.uk) or Emma Rees (Gov.Comms@lse.ac.uk). We look forward to hearing from you.

Join us for *‘Truth for Giulio Regeni!’ Transnational Activism and Human Rights Violations in Egypt* on 2 March 2017.



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Note: this article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Department of Government, nor of the London School of Economics.

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