



Working collectively to support and promote community work as a means of addressing poverty, social exclusion and inequality and advancing human rights

# Collective Action in an Era of Social Distancing

Listening Circle Discussions March 2<sup>nd</sup> 2021  
Report

## **Pandemic as a Portal**

“Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudices and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage to imagine another world and ready to fight for it” – [Arundhati Roy](#)<sup>1</sup>

*We would leave the following behind as we go through the portal...*

Complacency,  
Indifference,  
Issues reduced to inconsequential responses,  
The frenetic pace of life that was there before the pandemic,  
The lack of boundaries between living and working that working online from home has brought,  
The loss of human contact and interaction,  
The opportunity that the COVID crisis has afforded the far right,  
Consumerism and materialism, and  
Maybe we need to bring very little with us and to be ready to start again.

*We would take the following with us through the portal...*

Time and collective spaces for reflection, creativity, and meaningful conversations,  
The potential in technology for involving people,  
Solidarity and connectedness that has emerged between people, groups, organisations, and sectors, and the spaces for such solidarity,  
The shift in our thinking that the impossible has become possible,  
The challenge to reimagine the ‘normal’ rather than recover it,  
Participation, meaningful engagement, and inclusion of minority voices in shaping the new world,

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<sup>1</sup> Arundhati Roy is an author, actress and political activist. Quote from: The Pandemic is a Portal, in AZADI Freedom – Fascism - Fiction, Roy A., Penguin, 2020.

Linking agendas such as more equal societies are good for public health.

## Looking forward, what is the change we now seek? Should the agenda evolve?

This is a moment of opportunity. Preparedness needs building as there will be further crises. Root causes have to be addressed. The local, the national, and the global need to be linked.

There is a lack of a wider vision regarding the alternative that we seek. There is a danger that we go back to 'business as usual'. We need to develop and project a vision for the change we want. An agenda that offers hope is needed: people are weary and they need to feel hopeful

An agenda that encompasses action on climate change and addressing inequalities; investment in and resilience of public services for care of older people, childcare, education and health; reinforcing the values of local and of community; an economic agenda to challenge capitalism and its inequalities of wealth and income.

Transformation is required. A repositioning of arguments for equality and solidarity is possible. An urgency is required behind addressing climate change and inequality together: the concept of 'Just transition' needs to be deepened and pursued.

## Given these ideas for a changed agenda – is there anything new or different in HOW we might pursue that agenda?

We need to become more effective, demanding, radical, militant. We cannot just be saying the same things. We need to find what makes a difference. We need to get used to winning. The sector needs to provide leadership. We need to create spaces to harness the frustration that is out there and the energy for social change. We need to build a social movement for equality through community work, community work organisations, and communities.

A vision of positive change has to be developed. We have to offer hope. Messages need to be developed to carry this vision and bring people with us. Values of solidarity and the common good need to be engaged. Specific campaigns need to be linked into or pursued and connected in a manner that is embedded in this larger vision and progresses this vision.

Power has to be mobilised behind the vision of positive change. We need to build alliances with the environmental, trade unions, and cultural sectors and between communities. We need to find effective ways to make the case, engage with people, and mobilise people behind the vision of positive change.

Politics has to be engaged with. Political accountability needs to be structured and required. Political parties that share some of the vision of positive change could be engaged with.

Our tactics need to be creative. Online creativity has the potential to inform and engage and to mobilise and involve. Technology needs to be made better use of.

There is learning in previous movements for change, even where these did not succeed. Referenda campaigns, water protests, and Claiming Our Future are experiences that hold learning. We need to document the learning from our work and build a body of knowledge.



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