

Civil Society as a Force for Change

Niall Crowley

Introduction

The Community Work Ireland call for action on climate justice is timely. We face a range of inequalities, inequalities that are getting worse, that are locked in and unchanging, and that are moving but at a glacial pace. We face climate change that is progressing at speed, with growing destructive force and potential, and with an inadequacy of response to match its pace. We confront vested interests, all too powerful in their defence of this unequal and destructive status quo, blocking change for equality and environmental sustainability.

Srečko Horvat, the Croatian philosopher, writes:

The present seems omnipresent. Yet no one seems to believe in the future any more. Our world no longer appears connected by the shared hope of a better future: on the contrary it is hyper-connected by a prevailing feeling that there is no future at all.

In this, he catches the mood. This mood is one reason that we need a creative, robust and effective civil society, including our community work sector. It is a reason for us as a sector to imagine, communicate and progress a future of equality and environmental sustainability. It is why we as a sector need to offer hope for a future of such proportions.

This is hope, as conceived by Rebecca Solnit, the American writer and activist. She writes 'hope is not the belief that everything is or will be fine'. The hope she is interested in is about: 'broad perspectives with specific possibilities, ones that invite and demand that we act'. Hope involves 'an account of complexities and uncertainties, but with openings'.

A call to action for climate justice invites interrogation as to purpose.

Is it opportunistic? Is this about moments of crisis, moments of significant change, being moments when community work can gain some foothold for its agenda of social justice, however tenuous?

Is it mechanistic? Is this about the need to remind and insist with the powerful, as they ever so slowly progress climate mitigation and adaptation strategies, that they need to implement their public sector equality and human rights duty, to check out issues for and impacts on groups experiencing inequality and disadvantage, and to respond adequately to these?

Or could it be strategic? Could it be that when it comes to equality and environmental sustainability, you are unlikely to progress one effectively without progressing both?

Strategic Purpose

Nancy Fraser, the American philosopher, offers us what she calls:

An analysis of the current societal and economic order that clarifies the relations among the disparate social struggles of our time.

With such analysis, the struggle for equality and the struggle for environmental sustainability become the one struggle. She further suggests that such an analysis:

Could foster close cooperation if not the full unification of our most advanced progressive currents.

If this is the one struggle, we are challenged to: break with fragmentation; look beyond our siloed sectors; and form up as a civil society for equality and environmental sustainability.

This is why the ‘Feminist Communities for Climate Justice’ initiative of Community Work Ireland and of the National Women’s Council of Ireland, is so important.

Nancy Fraser sets out her analysis of an economy that is, in effect, an institutionalised societal order. In the foreground, there is the relentless search for growth, accumulation, and profit. This is rooted in the inequalities of exploited labour, and follows the imperative of the market and of private property.

This is an economy that can only function on the basis of what she calls ‘enabling background conditions of a non-economic nature’. This is an economy that functions through the ‘cannibalisation’ of:

- Social reproduction, with reproductive work afforded little value, rendered an arena of unwaged and underpaid work, rooted in pervasive gender inequality.
- The earth’s ecology, with nature rendered as a source of cost-free economic inputs and as a sink to absorb production’s waste, this being done without repair or replenishment of nature.
- Land, labour, and natural resources of subjugated and racialised peoples, both historical and current, with such racialised expropriation being rooted in a pervasive racism.

With such analysis, change for equality and change for environmental sustainability become a singular task. This task is to replace this model of development, this economy and its institutionalised society order. This is the one struggle to achieve a new economy with a different relationship to society, nature and politics. This is the singular pursuit of a transition in the way we live, the way we produce and the way we interact. It is the singular pursuit of a shift in societal priorities and values, from the material to the social, and from the individual to the collective.

A Driver for Change

In our demand for change we inevitably look to politics as the driver for change. However, Nancy Fraser alerts us that this economy is also based on the cannibalisation of politics. It cannibalises the political to secure the public goods, the infrastructure, the legislation and the finance it requires to pursue its goals.

We end up with a low energy political system, incapable of the transformational change required for equality and environmental sustainability. Peadar Kirby and Mary Murphy, Irish academics and activists, establish how the Irish state:

Has become increasingly captured by vested interests with strong veto power to stop reforms in their tracks. This leads to a frozen landscape characterised by paralysis and failure to respond effectively.

While change in our political system must therefore be a priority, towards a more participative democracy with a wider popular engagement in decision-making, we need to look elsewhere for the core driver for transformative change. A civil society for equality and environmental sustainability needs to step forward, a civil society that includes but goes beyond the community work sector.

However, in looking to civil society, and the community work sector, we need to acknowledge that it faces both external and internal barriers that must be addressed if it is to be able to serve as this core driver for transformative change.

External and Internal Barriers

Civil society is corralled, diminished and undermined by external barriers. Our aspirations for transformative change are blocked. This is not the over repression we are witnessing in other European jurisdictions, but it is nonetheless stifling of purpose and potential.

Civil society is subject to funding regimes that:

- Fail to resource advocacy by the sector, are hostile to advocacy, and even prohibit advocacy.
- Impose an imperative of service provision on the sector, rendering the sector as a flexible reserve of public services that can be expanded in the good times, but cut back with ease and speed in the times of economic difficulty.
- Bureaucratise civil society and overburdens organisations with administrative, governance, and reporting requirements, putting people on an endless treadmill of busyness.

As it seeks to impact on policy making, civil society is corralled into engagement processes with the state that:

- Lock our organisations into structures and processes of little influence, where we have limited bargaining power, beyond the power of a well-crafted argument.
- Limit our agenda of policy change to one of problem solving, with no space afforded to focus on the transformative change required.
- Confine us to inputting into the priorities of the policy makers rather than drawing them into an agenda reflective of the interests of those experiencing inequality.

This limiting external environment generates a range of internal barriers to civil society fulfilling its potential. Organisational culture is strangled, where:

- Repetitive participation in policy fora along with an endless preparation of policy submissions, couple with lack of progress and impact, generates a process of ritual rather than purpose for organisations. In the face of an apparent impossibility of change, a form of mourning takes hold and undermines organisational confidence in the possibility of change. Srečko Horvat warns, ‘the refusal to believe in the possibility of an alternative inevitably results in a disenchanting acceptance of the status quo’.
- The imperative of service provision shifts us from being advocates to being managers. Core organisational values get prioritised. Our founding values of dignity, empowerment, and social justice fall down the pecking order, replaced by values of professionalism, efficiency, excellence and value for money.

Imagination is strangled where:

- Our strategy to achieve change narrows to a singular set of tactics, to engage in the structures and processes on offer with persuasion and a good argument our key tools, underpinned by the insider status of participation in what is an elite dialogue. Our repertoire of tactics degrades for lack of imagination.
- Our agenda for change remains underdeveloped with our ambitions dropped to seeking incremental change. This leaves the new social order that reflects equality and environmental sustainability, still to be imagined and articulated.

Naomi Klein, Canadian author and activist, characterises this as the atrophy of the imagination:

Previously times of rupture served to unleash the ‘utopian imagination’ engendering a situation where people dared to dream big, out loud and in public together... by the time the 2008 financial fiasco was unfolding that ‘utopian imagination’ had largely

atrophied... generations that had grown up under neo-liberalism's vice struggle to picture something other than what they had already known.

Building Power

Despite such external and internal barriers, we have civil society organisations, including in the community work sector, that broke through external restraints and threw off internal constraints, to raise issues of transformative change. This achieved some successes but more often than not suffered defeat. Either way, they offer us, what Srecko Horvat calls 'traces and legacies that bring us forward'.

These traces and legacies tell us that if civil society is to be a force for change, for equality and environmental sustainability, it needs to focus on building and deploying power. This power to imagine, bring forward and progress an agenda of transition. It is power to contest those vested interests that would preserve a cruel status quo.

Eduardo Silva, the American-based academic, in his work on Latin American struggles, identifies three strands to such power:

- Associational power, which emphasises organisation and organising, and is about 'creating adequate associational space for citizens to congregate publicly'.
- Ideological power, which emphasises new ideas and the communication of new ideas, reflecting 'the capacity of new ideas to shape policy options and principles of social organisations', and which is about 'shifting perceptions about problems... turning isolated instances of protest into growing streams of mobilisation'.
- Collective power, which emphasises alliance building, collaboration and coordination, and which is about 'connecting grievances and goals to broader policy and political purpose'.

Call to Action

A call to action for climate justice needs to involve the community work sector in building and deploying associational power.

We have the organisations, but we are challenged to do the organising, building the evidence of the demand for change and empowering that demand. This involves mobilising people, creating spaces for people to connect, learn and develop skills, and providing independent and autonomous platforms to advance the demand for equality and environmental sustainability through collective action.

Alicia Garza, one of the founders of Black Lives Matter in America, writes:

The change we seek can only be accomplished through sustained organising. If we want to influence the decision makers to either reverse the decision or do something different, we have to demonstrate this is something a lot of people care about and there will be consequences if don't do what we need them to do.

Organising underpins finely crafted arguments with bargaining power.

A call to action for climate justice needs to involve the community work sector in building and deploying ideological power.

We have the ideas, but we are challenged to build agendas for change that go beyond a listing of specific policy demands and to present a vision for the new society and the model of development that would underpin it. We are challenged to build a comprehensive and compelling agenda of the transformational change required for equality and environmental sustainability.

In developing this agenda, we need to build a broad ownership for it, both in its creation and in its communication. In communicating the agenda, we deploy ideological power. This requires compelling messages and values-led communication to engage people with the agenda and to secure their adherence to the movement for such change.

In this we need to move out of current defensive modes, constantly focused on what we don't want. We need to rigorously focus on what we do want. Chantal Mouffe, Belgian author and political theorist, reminds us that we:

Need to offer people a vision of the future that gives them hope, instead of remaining in the register of denunciation.

A call to action for climate justice needs to involve the community work sector in building and deploying collective power.

We have the relationships across different sectors to enable collective power, but we are challenged to create and sustain the systems and structures for long-term collaboration and coordination behind goals of equality and environmental sustainability. This requires us to break with fragmentation, move from definition of ourselves by sector to definition by goal, and link what Eduardo Silva calls 'power clusters' behind shared values and goals.

Eduard Silva notes that 'collective power is at its height when those collaborating include actors from two or more power clusters'. Such power cluster encompass relevant actors within:

- The community work sector and the environmental sector with their power base of popular mobilisation.
- The trade union sector with their economic power base.
- The cultural sector with their power base of creativity and capacity to shape popular consciousness.
- The political sector with its power base in political decision-making.

In this we need to find that common ground across these power clusters, create spaces for deliberation and agenda building, devise systems and structures for collaboration and coordination, and sustain these systems over time.

In building and deploying this power, we need creative power to move beyond ritual enactments of dissatisfaction with the status quo, with a broader repertoire for and creativity to our tactics.

Conclusion

Rebecca Solnit reminds us that a time of crisis is a moment when:

We may feel free to pursue change in ways that seemed impossible while the ice of the status quo was locked up. We may have a profoundly different sense of ourselves, our community, our system of production, and our future.

As the ice melts, metaphorically and literally, we need to respond to this call for action by:

- Reflecting on and reimagining our role and potential as civil society actors.
- Break out of our fragmented sectors, building a civil society for equality and environmental sustainability.
- Take time to reflect on our current situation as a community work sector, and on our current approach to social change.
- Develop and implement strategies to build and deploy power: organising; communicating new ideas; and collaborating and coordinating across sectors.