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# LEARNING TOGETHER FOR CHANGE: COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS ADVANCING HUMAN RIGHTS IN SCOTLAND

APRIL 2024



# BACKGROUND: RIGHTS IN ACTION

**R**ights in Action is a three-year project working across Scotland to support communities to use human rights as a tool for change. Rights in Action is funded by the Scottish Government's Equality and Human Rights Fund managed and supported by Inspiring Scotland.

The project has three workstreams:

- 1 'Know Your Rights' workshops** to raise awareness of how human rights can be used as a tool in the fight against poverty.
- 2 Action Learning Sets** to bring together community organisations and community members to identify actions to support rights realisation and combat poverty.
- 3 Participatory research projects** enabling community researchers to generate learning on the overlaps between human rights and intersections of inequality and to undertake action.

**This report summarises progress to date and key learning from the first stage of workstream two. This workstream has one key objective: to bring groups together to analyse, understand and plan action to address poverty using a human rights lens.**

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The Poverty Alliance is Scotland's anti-poverty network. Together with our members, we influence policy and practice, support communities to challenge poverty, provide evidence through research and build public support for the solutions to tackle poverty. Our members include grassroots community groups, academics, large national NGOs, voluntary organisations, statutory organisations, trade unions, and faith groups.

The Poverty Alliance is recognised as a charity by the Inland Revenue. Reference No: SCO19926.

[www.povertyalliance.org](http://www.povertyalliance.org)

## Disclaimer

The views in this report are those of the researchers and the action learning participants and opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the Poverty Alliance or our members.

## Acknowledgements

The Rights in Action team would like to thank the community organisations who took part in the Rights in Action action learning sets.

## Funders

Rights in Action is funded by the Scottish Government's Equality and Human Rights Fund, managed and supported by Inspiring Scotland.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report shares key learning from an action learning set with community organisations and members conducted as part of the Poverty Alliance's Rights in Action project. Funded by the Scottish Government's Equality and Human Rights Fund and supported by Inspiring Scotland, Rights in Action is a three-year project working across Scotland to support communities to use human rights as a tool for change.

This report includes five case studies of organisations' experiences of advancing human rights through participating in action learning sets as well as reflections and learning from the project around taking a human rights-based approach and human rights education. It draws on interviews with participants, participant learning logs and pre-session reviews, and project team observations and reflections.

## About the action learning sets

Between 2022 and 2023, we facilitated action learning sets with community organisations and members to analyse, understand and plan action to address poverty using a human rights lens. Action learning was selected as methodology to support organisational and social change due to its participatory, action-focused approach. Poverty Alliance also has extensive experience in using action learning sets to take on complex issues.

## Who was involved?

Seven organisations initially engaged in this initial phase of the project, with five completing it. The five organisations who completed the project were: a volunteer-led environmental

community development organisation; a community organisation and building; a grassroots rural anti-poverty organisation with a focus on food provision; a grassroots, anti-racist charitable organisation with a focus on youth and women's empowerment; and a family support organisation.

## Issues covered

After undertaking human rights training together, participants came together monthly to explore issues that they were encountering in their work using the action learning methodology. These included but were not limited to: embedding a human rights-based approach organisationally, becoming an entirely lived experience led organisation, setting up an influence and change team to support systems change, managing increases in long term foodbank referrals, and embedding community wealth building.

## Impact

Participants were able to identify and action changes around these issues, leading to sustainable change in their practice, organisation and communities. The impact of the actions taken by set members have been far reaching and have included: reduced need for long-term foodbank referrals through improved partnership working, deepening community participation, embedding measures to combat intra-community racism throughout all projects, upskilling of staff with lived experience, increased advocacy and accountability, and embedding human rights-based approaches.

## Barriers to making change

The context in Scotland, when the project took place in 2023, presented several barriers to making change. Organisational capacity was cited as a barrier by multiple set members, particularly in the context of the cost-of-living crisis. The complexity of the issues faced by communities was also cited as a barrier, with set members regularly having to deal with complex urgent issues. Funding was also cited as a barrier.

## Key learning

Barriers aside, participants found the process meaningful, and all of the set members reported that the process had supported them to advance economic, social, and cultural rights. Furthermore, participants added that they were now better able to integrate human rights and equality into their work more widely as a result of taking part in the process. Many noted that they now fundamentally saw their work as being human rights work. Every set member had said they had learnt from one another about how to better engage groups facing marginalisation.

Participants also reported having experienced additional benefits from being part of the project and from the action learning methodology. Every set member found the peer support helpful and reported feeling like the set were like a supportive community of practice, benefitting from learning from others, and changes in the way they think about and approach problems. Participants also highlighted the way in which the project had helped them grow as a person.

The process also highlighted the work we do in the anti-poverty sector as fundamentally human rights work, and the need for organisations to be supported to see it as such and to use human rights frameworks confidently. This is particularly important given the changing human rights context in Scotland. Learning is deepened when more time is put aside for organisations to explicitly map their work to internationally defined rights, UN articles, and human rights principles. Peer support and sustained learning in combination is vitally important in the anti-poverty sector, particularly when making changes to practice in a difficult context.

# BACKGROUND: POVERTY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Human rights are legally recognised minimum standards for dignity. They were developed to outline states' obligations towards individuals in response to the atrocities committed in the Second World War.

Economic, social, and cultural rights are recognised under seven international treaties ratified by the UK which the Scottish Parliament has competence to observe and implement. This includes both the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).

Economic, social, and cultural rights are fundamental human rights that establish the basic standards of material security necessary for a dignified life. These include but are not limited to: the right to an adequate standard of living (including food, clothing and housing), the right to health, the right to work and to just and favorable conditions of work (including fair pay), the right to join and form trade unions, and the right to social security. They also include the rights that support us to fully participate in society, such as the right to education, the right to take part in cultural life, and the right to the protection of family and children.

Poverty is not solely an economic condition; it is also a violation of human dignity and a cause and consequence of human rights failures.<sup>1 2</sup> Poverty often leads to the denial of fundamental human rights such as access to adequate food, shelter, health, and education.<sup>3</sup> By framing the indignities of poverty as violations of our human rights, experience of poverty can be understood as a failure of the state rather than of the individual. It also ensures that the state's responsibility to end poverty is acknowledged.

## Background: taking a human-rights based approach

There has been real progress in Scotland in the last ten years in developing rights-based approaches to addressing poverty. The incorporation of the UNCRC and the commitment to incorporate the ICESCR are only the most recent developments.

Taking a human rights-based approach empowers individuals to 'name and claim' their human rights and enables organisations to recognise and fulfil their responsibilities by prioritising people in decision-making processes.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, 'it also creates

<sup>1</sup> OHCHR (no date) OHCHR and the human rights dimension of poverty (no date). Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/poverty>

<sup>2</sup> Human Rights Consortium et al (2023) International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights: Report to the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (2023). Available at: <https://hrscotland.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/International-Covenant-on-Economic-Social-and-Cultural-Rights-Report-to-the-UN-Committee-on-Economic-Social-and-Cultural-Rights-Joint-Report-Dec-2022.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Poverty Alliance et al (2020) Found Wanting: understanding journeys into and out of food insecurity: a longitudinal study. Available at: <https://amenuforchange.files.wordpress.com/2020/01/found-wanting-a-menu-for-change-final.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Poverty Alliance (2021) Marginalised Communities and Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in Scotland: A literature review. Available at: <https://www.povertyalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/RIA-Review-April-2022-Final-PDF.pdf>

FIGURE 1: International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights



solid accountability so people can seek remedies when their rights are violated.<sup>5</sup> The use of this approach, encouraged by the changing human rights context in Scotland, has increased in recent years.<sup>6</sup>

The Scottish Human Rights Commission developed the PANEL principles to break down what taking a human rights-based approach can mean in practice.<sup>7</sup> These principles can be summarised as the following:

**Participation:** Everyone has the right to participate in decisions which affect them. Participation must be active, free, and meaningful, and give attention to issues of accessibility, including access to information in a form and a language which can be understood.

**Accountability:** There should be effective monitoring of human rights realisation and how people’s rights are being affected.

There should be remedy when things go wrong. For accountability to be effective there must be appropriate laws, policies, administrative procedures, and mechanisms of redress in order to secure human rights.

**Non-discrimination and equality:** All forms of discrimination must be prohibited, prevented, and eliminated. It also requires the prioritisation of those in the most vulnerable situations who face the biggest barriers to realising their rights.

**Empowerment:** People should understand their rights and be fully supported to participate in the development of policy and practices which affect their lives.

**Legality:** The full range of legally protected human rights must be respected, protected, and fulfilled. A human rights-based approach requires the recognition of rights as legally enforceable entitlements and is linked in to national and international human rights law.

<sup>5</sup> Scottish Human Rights Commission (no date) A human rights based approach: An introduction.

Available at: [https://www.scottishhumanrights.com/media/1409/shrc\\_hrba\\_leaflet.pdf](https://www.scottishhumanrights.com/media/1409/shrc_hrba_leaflet.pdf)

Scottish Human Rights Commission (2018) Human Rights Based Approach A Self-Assessment Tool.

Available at: [https://www.scottishhumanrights.com/media/1814/shrc\\_panel\\_self-assessment\\_tool\\_vfinal.pdf](https://www.scottishhumanrights.com/media/1814/shrc_panel_self-assessment_tool_vfinal.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> The Alliance (2023) Human Rights in Health and Social Care: where we’ve been and the journey ahead.

Available at: <https://www.povertyalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/RIA-Review-April-2022-Final-PDF.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Scottish Human Rights Commission (no date) A human rights based approach: An introduction.

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# OUR APPROACH: WHY ACTION LEARNING SETS?

Many in the third sector have been at the forefront of pressing for increased human rights protections and further human rights-based decision making in public bodies. However, there is more to be done to support the third sector to harness the power of taking a human rights-based approach.

The Poverty Alliance has extensive experience in using an Action Learning Set (ALS) methodology to both analyse and take action on complex problems. Since it is a participatory, action orientated approach, we felt that ALS was an ideal methodology to support participants to analyse and plan action to address poverty using a human rights lens and to make change in their organisations and their communities. The focus on action ensured that there would be tangible outcomes for those involved.

**‘Action is the first requirement for action learning: it is the origin of significant learning and the outcome point of that learning.’<sup>8</sup>**

The five organisations who participated in the project included: a volunteer-led environmental community development organisation; a community organisation and building; a grassroots rural anti-poverty organisation with a focus on food provision; a grassroots, anti-racist charitable organisation with a focus on youth and women’s empowerment; and a family support organisation. Three of the organisations operate in urban areas, one regional and one rural.

Prior to starting the formal ALS methodology, each set undertook training on human rights and the action learning methodology. From that point onwards, the sets met monthly, unless there were significant drop offs in numbers due to unforeseen events.

Anonymity is a key principle that underpins ALS. Consequently, not all the content of the sets or actions taken as a result of taking part in this process are shared in this report.



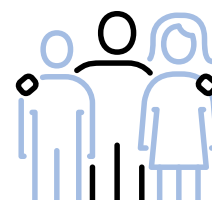
<sup>8</sup> Pedlar, M (2020) On social action, Action Learning, vol. 17, no. 1, pp. 1-9. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14767333.2020.1712833>

# CASE STUDIES

**The following case studies share learning from issues presented on in the action learning sets by community organisations that participated in the project, including identified actions, impacts and their wider reflections on taking part in the action learning process.**

## CASE STUDY ONE

**A HUMAN RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH: how can I embed human rights into my organisation's work?**



### Issue

The set member explored how they could embed human rights and a human rights-based approach into their work in a way that combats prevailing practices that reproduce poverty and that does not feel like 'just another thing' for volunteers to do. They were concerned that people are too busy with the day-to-day reality of service delivery to reflect on the wider issue of poverty. They acknowledged that at this volunteer-led organisation, volunteers are stretched due to the cost-of-living crisis and need to be protected from burnout. Concerns were shared about the fact this was the context into which they would be introducing new human rights frameworks and concepts. Amongst volunteers, understanding of the human rights failures and structures that perpetuate poverty was varied. Challenging structures and pursuing accountability were usually seen as the ALS participant's role. They stated that they would like to see a shift from being an organisation who treats the symptoms of poverty to one who addresses the causes of poverty and would like to use a human rights-based approach to do so.

### Agreed actions

- Going on a weekend away together, to spend time together, but also have a training with an external facilitator to focus on who the organisation is and where they hope to go, specifically how they can move towards a campaigning role to support holding duty bearers to account.
- Organising a community conference to bring the community together to identify their key priorities for the local area and to ensure the participation of the wider community in decision-making structures. This would also explore whether the council's plans for the community align with community goals.
- Using this conference to create a voice for the wider community.
- Finding ways to support volunteer learning. Another set member, in their reflections on the process, suggested they invite a prominent anti-poverty activist or trade unionist to speak to the community. The presenter agreed to this action and had a particular author in mind.





## Results

In the follow-up meetings of the group, this set member shared that the first action that they took was inviting a prominent anti-poverty author, activist, and personality to speak in their community. This had a large impact in situating the current issues and levels of poverty in the community within wider structural issues.

As a result of this event, more people came forward to volunteer in the local area. There has also been increased campaigning activity on wider political issues as well as local issues.

**‘People really related to it. It was speaking and he was speaking in our own vernacular. It was relevant, it really resonated with local people... it actually encouraged a number of people to offer to volunteer locally. There was a real fire in the belly created as a consequence of that.’**

**‘It helped change the narrative about my area, which is always the aim of what we do, by welcoming folks who would have perhaps never come to our area, but it also allowed folks, local people who were involved at the coalface, to see how their work related to that bigger picture...**

**It’s led on to a number of different things. People have been actively campaigning, they have been at counter protests against the far right, but also addressing local issues like fly tipping or the fact that a whole swathe of our community is up for demolition.’**

This action was also seen to have supported a focus of another meeting of the set, where this set member explored how to democratise local participatory structures by encouraging more local people to get involved in community decision-making structures.

When the set members met for a final time, this set member had taken the organisation’s core volunteers on a trip away for four days. During this time, the organisation devised a business plan, spoke about a rights-based approach and human rights more broadly.

**‘It was an easy conversation to have because there was the tearing up of the Human Rights Act, and all that was in the media at the time. It was things that people were happy to ask questions about. “I don’t quite understand what I’m seeing in the news. What does that mean?” It was a volunteer-led conversation.’**

In a final evaluation interview, the set member noted initial trepidation at taking part in Rights in Action because they work in a community with very high levels of poverty, and they were concerned that human rights were lofty and academic. As we went through the process together, they recognised the importance of communicating about human rights in a way that resonates with community members. They noted the importance of the Poverty Alliance training on human rights, but also a need for them, as a local practitioner, to link that knowledge to the issues being faced by their community and to have a series of more informal conversations in local settings.

The set member stated that since the weekend away and these conversations about human rights, volunteers have felt more confident to identify and call out rights violations and discrimination.

At the time of the final evaluation interview, the presenter had planned a community conference in partnership with other community members to ensure that people had a say in the issues that impact their rights, and that community development plans reflected the needs and desires of the community.

## Wider reflections

The set member reflected that they were already doing many of the components of taking a human rights-based approach prior to taking part in Rights in Action but that they had not been speaking about their work in that way. They reflected that there was capacity building needed to get everyone to the same point in their understanding of how poverty is structurally reinforced by legislation, policy and practice. In feedback, immediately

after the set, the set member acknowledged that their practice needs to be inclusive and appreciative of where people were currently at and find innovative and creative ways to facilitate learning at a community level. In the final evaluation interview, the presenter shared they felt like they had made great strides in this, despite their initial concerns when they decided to bring this issue to the action learning set.

The presenter acknowledged how important the process of Action Learning had been in supporting them to address things they had wanted to address for some time, and the importance of the safe space for reflection, learning, and planning that the set had provided.

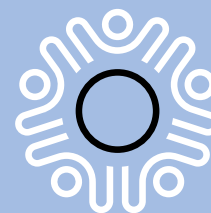
**‘I’m actually quite surprised myself because I remember presenting that particular issue and thinking, “oh no, where do I even begin here?” It felt so large. But the way you approached those ALS sessions, in terms of breaking it down in manageable parts, it was really beneficial for me as an individual and allowed me to go away and consider the individual parts rather than looking at it as one huge task.’**

The community of practice created by bringing together organisations working in the anti-poverty sector was noted as being particularly important.

**‘Just having that safe space for me was extremely beneficial and quite early on it became clear to me, regardless of who was presenting. We could all resonate with what each other were talking about.’**

## CASE STUDY TWO

### PARTICIPATION: how can we become an entirely lived experience-led organisation?



#### Issue

The set member explored the question of how they could become an entirely lived experience-led organisation. This has been an organisational goal for some time and the organisation is partially led by those with lived experience, but due to the severe marginalisation faced by the community, there were several barriers to reaching this goal. Through the set, the group explored these barriers and potential solutions to these. The barriers identified through this process included: school non-attendance leading to low educational attainment, language barriers, highly gendered distribution of household tasks and childcare, lack of community understanding of and buy-in for the longer-term mission of the organisation, funding, and capacity of the organisation.

#### Agreed Actions

- Hosting a day to bring people together to get buy-in to the vision of the organisation, ensuring that sessional workers and young activists attend. This day should also be open to the wider community.
- Finding funding for this day.
- Supporting the development of young people.
- Supporting lived-experienced workers with additional training, but making sure that training suits their needs.
- Long-term goals included increased numbers of trained staff to engage with younger children in the community.
- Putting increased energy into projects that supported educational attainment.

#### Results

The set member noted that as a result of discussing this issue in the action learning set, there has been a step-change in the way that they work and that there is a consistent and conscious focus on the upskilling of lived experience staff built into everything the organisation does.

**‘I’m definitely thinking about the way I phase myself out more. As a result of this set, everything we do, we are focusing on how we support our lived experience staff to take the lead. It’s kind of always been that way, but now we are definitely consciously doing this more.’**

Young people with lived experience have been supported to get involved with and co-lead other projects across Scotland, allowing them to develop as future leaders. The set member noted that the partnerships that have come about as a result of involvement in the action learning set have been ‘transformational.’

Organising a day to encourage community engagement with the future of the organisation was put on the back burner due to their capacity at this time as well as funding and staff constraints. However, the organisation has restructured their approach around how it communicates their objectives, emphasising the importance of the community’s involvement in the development of the organisation.

The focus of this set influenced another set further on in the process, one which focused on supporting the development of an activist and led to a whole host of other actions being taken. These included developing mentoring relationships, and creating a film which has had far reaching positive impacts.

### **Wider reflections**

Immediately after the set, the set member stated that they found it extremely helpful to have others acknowledge the complexity of the environment in which they were working, and to reaffirm that no one organisation can tackle everything alone and the importance of building coalitions of support.

The set member described the sets and being part of the process as being deeply impactful for them as an individual and that the process has had far-reaching impacts on the organisation.

**‘For me personally it’s been quite transformative on a more philosophical level, just the way I think about stuff, the way I hold space for working out problems. I think the space an action learning set holds is very, very special.’**

**‘Organisationally as well, it helps a lot... it has kind of filtered into all of our work.’**

## CASE STUDY THREE

### ACCOUNTABILITY: how can I set up an influence and change team to focus on systems change?



#### Issue

The set member explored how to put together an effective influence and change team to embed systems change practice in the whole of the organisation. When describing this challenge, they acknowledged that their organisation is skilled at delivery but that they see the same things impacting people repeatedly, and that these things needed to be changed. They felt these issues needed to be drawn out and addressed to have an impact on a wider level to effect structural change. Without doing so, the organisation would have to continue to deliver services without any real sustainable and meaningful change. With the support of the group, they explored their short-term and long-term goals, identified some of the key barriers they anticipated, and planned solutions to these barriers. Barriers included that the newly formed team did not yet have the capacity to be able to respond and that people needed to be empowered to challenge duty bearers as this is a change in their job roles which will put them into situations they may never have been in. The set member acknowledged that there may be initial growing pains in establishing a process to ensure that the reality of what is happening on the ground is being conveyed to the newly formed influence and change team. The goal by the end of the year was for the organisation to develop with teams spending 20% of their time thinking about systems change, and for the influence and change team to agree on its objectives and to be able to respond to key themes that are impacting families.

#### Agreed Actions

- Ensuring there is buy-in from the leadership team and that they are on board with the idea of embedding systems change and comfortable with the concept.

- Building capacity on systems change theory and the cultural shift within the organisation.
- Asking team leaders to ringfence 20% of meeting time and 20% of time in one-to-ones to think about systems change.
- Agreeing to meeting times and to the purpose of the influence and change team.
- Developing a vision for the influence and change team and developing twelve-month objectives that all of the team agree are realistic.
- Mentoring members of the influence and change team and inviting them to shadow the set member in meetings with duty bearers to build their confidence in challenging decisions and processes.
- Supporting the influence and change team in upskilling around policy and how to use policy as a lever for change.
- Ensuring that staff members know they have the organisation's support when they challenge duty bearers.
- Publicising any wins within the organisation to support buy-in.

#### Results

Since presenting the set, the set member made systems change the focus of each quarterly staff development day and they feel that the cultural shift is underway in the leadership team. Time is being ringfenced in all team meetings to discuss systems that are not working for families, including internal processes and policies which have been reviewed and changed. The time spent discussing the new goals of the organisation has had an impact as the presenter is now getting emails from staff directly about issues they are encountering repeatedly.

The change and influence team meet monthly and have decided their objectives and main areas of work. Members of the team have also been bringing policy documents and consultations that relate to their work to meetings. However, the set member who presented their issue acknowledged that the team members have other responsibilities too, so they must continue to lead in this area.

They noted that there have been changes throughout the organisation, not only in the ways the organisation is identifying issues that are impacting lots of families, but also increased confidence from staff to advocate for individual families directly and to hold duty bearers to account.

**‘There are lots of things we are seeing with lots of families, that’s bigger and then we take it forward as an organisation because that’s where we’re seeing common threads. Then there’s the individual stuff that’s happening, the advocacy. We are saying to staff, don’t be afraid to advocate... you’re challenging someone’s right to something... We will have your back.’**

Housing has emerged as a key issue for families. The influence and change team identified housing as the first area where they could make a meaningful difference in the short term; for example, through the stripping of social housing of all furniture, curtains etc. when a new tenant moves in. The set member reflected that this came from the team rather than from them. This was understood to be evidence of a cultural shift within the organisation.

The next piece of work around this the set member is going to undertake is explicitly linking their systems change work with the PANEL principles.

They also noted that they wanted to be more public about the systems change work they were doing. This responds to observations of other set members who noted that this could be a blueprint for service delivery organisations to make meaningful structural change to reduce levels of poverty, and that this journey should be publicised in blogs and by other means.

## Wider reflections

In the final evaluation interview, the set member reflected that the process had not been as difficult as was initially anticipated and that systems change work had always been going on, but in a less structured way and without naming it as such.

The set member found the peer support offered by being part of an action learning set process particularly important.

**‘Being a manager of a charity can be a weird, isolated position. It was helpful meeting other people in that position.’**

**‘There’s lots of different personalities, which is really good, and lots of different organisations and lots of personal and professional experience in the mix. That’s quite helpful when you are taking things to the group.’**

They also noted that a significant benefit of the process was the way in which it changed their thinking style, a change which had carried through to other pieces of work. They acknowledged that they could have ‘gone full throttle’ with the systems change work, but that would not have facilitated the cultural shift required to ensure sustainable change.



## CASE STUDY FOUR

### RIGHT TO FOOD: how can I manage increases in long-term emergency food referrals?



#### Issue

The set member explored the issue of how they could manage the recent increase in long-term emergency food referrals due to the cost-of-living crisis, acknowledging that people's right to food was not being fulfilled. They are a small service with limited capacity and funding. People were increasingly being referred by predominantly statutory referral agents to the emergency food service for long periods of time. The organisation also provides person-centred support to help people but is not a social care organisation. The key issues that were underpinning this problem were the inconsistency of support to individuals provided by statutory referral partners, the inadequate social security system, people being knocked back by income maximisation services due to services being overwhelmed, lack of pathways into employment, and low pay. Low pay was particularly an issue for local authority employees. The set member estimated that around 50% of long-term referrals were lone parents working for the local authority.

#### Actions agreed

- Introducing methods to capture people's journey with the organisation.
- Thinking at a strategic level about how to respond to the cost-of-living crisis.
- Starting a dialogue with the local authority about the reality of the situation on the ground.
- Inviting referral organisations to an open day to discuss the work of the organisation and to support more joined-up working.
- Find a way to ensure access to income maximisation services.

#### Results

The first action that was taken was to invite referral agents to an open day so that people could share their expectations of one another and discuss how to respond to the cost-of-living crisis. This deepened relationships and improved joined-up working. By the end of the ALS meeting, there had been a second referral agent open day, and the presenter felt there was a significant increase in joined-up working.

**'We have had two open days which have been really good. The relationships with referral agents has improved and we can take a stronger approach together so we can make sure that we are doing right by the clients.'**

The set member developed a relationship with local welfare rights services, and they started to do a monthly drop-in service at the organisation. They also organised welfare rights coming along to preexisting groups the organisation runs to have a relaxed conversation with people about what they might be entitled to. After a subsequent set around continuing long-term referrals, the organisation ensured that meeting welfare rights and energy support was a condition of referral. They could do this due to the relationships built with local income maximisation services as a result of actions taken by previous sets.

The organisation implemented a customer relationships management system in order to keep track of people's journeys with them to understand what was supporting people during the cost-of-living crisis.

Overall, the organisation has reduced the numbers of long-term referrals by supporting people to access cash-first support, debt advice, and improved joined-up working with referral agencies. The focus on ensuring that people are supported adequately and have money in their pockets has supported people towards realising their right to an adequate standard of living.

**‘We have implemented new processes which have streamlined old processes much more efficiently.’**

## **Wider reflection**

It is understood that this issue is situated within wider economic and political structures. The organisation is continuing to campaign on these issues. In our evaluation interview, the presenter highlighted that the welfare system and, particularly, Universal Credit are effectively state sanctioned destitution, and that structural change is needed.

**‘Having a better connection with welfare rights and trying to connect people up with that as much as possible... but there will still be people who have maximised their income as much as they can. There’s nothing else they can do, and they still can’t afford to live. Other than put more pressure on policy makers there’s nothing more we can really do.’**

The presenter credited the action learning set process and the group’s support as facilitating their growth.

**‘I think I’ve grown a lot and the ALS has been a huge part of that. The process has been a huge part of that, but also the people within our little group have been a huge part in that... it has allowed me to grow and a human rights approach has run through it all.’**

## CASE STUDY FIVE

### MAXIMUM AVAILABLE RESOURCES: how can I bring people along with us on our community wealth building journey?



#### Issue

The set member outlined their organisation's aspiration to be an anchor organisation engaged in community wealth building (CWB) to support them in advancing economic, social and cultural rights in their local area. They identified that there are four key groups that they need to bring with them on this journey: the community, staff, funders, and the local authority. They reflected that they were already undertaking CWB to some extent but needed to restructure the team to ensure that there were staff members who were specifically focused on supporting the organisation to bring in revenue. A barrier to deepening this work was getting adequate funding to continue with a capital development project that was required for the organisation to be fully functional. Another barrier to bringing key stakeholders along with this conversation was local authority support and understanding of what CWB is, despite incoming national legislation.

#### Agreed Actions

- Starting to trial endeavours right away; for example, by giving a physical space in the building to someone who has an enterprise idea and to see if it succeeds.
- Starting to have smaller engagement events and activities with the community.
- Writing a business plan with concrete phases for the capital project.
- Continuing to engage with local authorities, inviting them in and trying to inspire them that things can be different.

- Engaging with the community to find out what people think about the organisation, and what needs to be done to position it as a community wealth building anchor organisation.
- Thinking about conducting mapping of the neighbourhood, both assessing what is in the area and the demographics of the neighbourhood.
- Thinking about repeated, large-scale communications efforts about what the organisation is trying to accomplish.

#### Actions Taken

- Created a business plan and developed a new phase of the capital project, learning from the initial phase.
- Conducted several community consultations where the different elements of community wealth building were explored. Did not use the formal language of CWB as they felt this could be alienating.
- Put up posters and asked community members to put stickers on the issues that they felt were most important.
- Invited external stakeholders from local government and local financial institutions to discuss the aims and goals of the organisation and to highlight that change is possible.

## Wider Reflections

The set member reflected on how a key barrier they had experienced was a lack of understanding about what community wealth building is on the part of key stakeholders.

**‘Even within the sector, barely anyone really understands what community wealth building is... when we were talking to, like, our commercial partners and corporate partners, they don’t have a clue what it is and they**

**don’t understand it. It’s a massive issue, I think, because there are loads of things that could be done to allow organisations like ours to truly build community wealth.’**

The set member also reflected that despite the actions they have taken, work around the issue they addressed in their set stalled due to the capacity of the organisation. They also noted that resource and capacity have been an ongoing issue throughout the set, particularly in the context of the cost-of-living crisis.

## OTHER IMPACTS FROM THE ACTION LEARNING SETS

Each action learning set presenter left each session with a list of actions which they came to by being held in a supportive, inquiring space by the group.

All the set members reported they were better able to integrate human rights and equality into their work as a result of taking part in the process.

Similarly, every set member said they had learnt from one another about better engaging with groups experiencing marginalisation.

The actions that set members have taken as a result of being part of the process have been far reaching. Outcomes included:

- An organisation mainstreaming non-discrimination and equality by building measures to support access and intra-community cohesion into all projects.
- Improved local participation and democracy by raising awareness of the importance of local democratic structures and the changes they have made in the local community.
- Supporting community members to get involved in local democratic structures, leading to a new and diverse pool of participants in community decision making structures.
- Strengthened organisational governance practices to improve the long-term sustainability of an organisation.
- Improved confidence to challenge senior decision makers, and subsequently actions being taken by these duty bearers to advance human rights, including increased funding.
- Pushing for improved participatory practices at local authority level.
- Improved communications strategies to ensure that information about services reaches wider audiences.
- Appointing wellbeing champions and creating a wellbeing budget to support staff resilience.
- Increased levels of community engagement in community education and learning.
- Deepening collaboration with other organisations on human rights projects.
- Improved knowledge of levers for change and which stakeholders to influence.

# BARRIERS TO MAKING CHANGE

A key principle and aim of the ALS process is to support participants to identify changes that they can take responsibility for. Throughout each set it is important that presenters use 'I' language to take ownership of the actions decided. A key criterion for involvement in the set included that the individual had to be in a position within their organisation where they were able to make changes. This criterion was put in place due to learning from a previous project around the challenges of trying to make changes without adequate resources and capability. However, set members in the Rights in Action project still experienced barriers that prevented them from taking action.

## 1. Funding

A key barrier to change expressed by multiple set members was funding. In one instance, the funding which a set member relied on meant they had to focus on a particular group of individuals rather than creating a more inclusive service, which was a goal of an action learning set.

**'Sometimes it feels like your funding flies in the face of that messaging of being quite inclusive as well.'**

The desire of funders to prioritise service delivery rather than supporting systems change within service delivery organisations was also seen as a potential barrier.

**'Funding is so focused on service delivery, there isn't time carved out to do stuff like this.'**

The arduousness of funding applications was also cited as another barrier to making change.

**'They are so lengthy and that detracts from the work we are supposed to do.'**

## 2. Size and complexity of issues faced by communities

A set member reflected that a barrier to organisational change can be the level of marginalisation faced by the community they work with. This can mean that there are often unexpected and extremely time sensitive issues that can emerge that can delay work.

**'It's about not getting too disheartened when things backtrack a bit because that is just the nature of this.'**

Another set member noted that the size of the issues they are facing are so huge and so complex in their area, but they were hopeful about finding what was within their sphere of influence.

**'Some of the issues facing families are so big. So we have to find the bit we can influence.'**

## 3. Organisational capacity

Organisational capacity was cited as a barrier by multiple set members, particularly in the context of the cost-of-living crisis.

**'Organisational capacity is we have great ideas for strategy and change, but it's people who are already burned out... every minute is manic.'**

**'We are small. Capacity and money are a barrier.'**



# USING ACTION LEARNING TO SUPPORT CHANGE: BENEFITS FOR PARTICIPANTS

## 1. Peer support

Every set member reported that the set was a supportive community of practice.

**‘This sounds really simple, but everyone’s nice, everyone’s supportive, everyone asks how you are, everyone is interested in hearing about updates... I think there is a genuine sense of – I wouldn’t say friendship – but it’s genuine peer support.’**

**‘We were all able to be completely honest with each other and I really appreciated people being honest and learning from them. It was so therapeutic in a way.’**

## 2. Learning from others

A benefit of using this methodology is that members effectively get to observe others’ thought processes and to also work out issues on their own, guided by insightful questions from others who work in the same field. The group was deliberately formed of organisations that were different in size and focus in order to facilitate knowledge and information sharing. In the final evaluation interview, all set members reported that they had been able to learn from one another and that this was an important part of the process.

**‘I found [another set member’s] insights really useful and their way of thinking... They have a different job and brain from me and the way they deal with their work and how they solve problems was very useful’.**

**‘Understanding and appreciating that we’ve all got different skillsets and that I’m bringing stuff to the table that will be useful for people... that was nice for me to think about and then in turn take other people’s knowledge.’**

## 3. Long-term changes in thinking

In the final evaluation interviews, all set members noted that a key outcome for them was how the action learning methodology had changed the way they think and approach problems.

**‘The set affected how I see the work, how I see myself. I think one of the most important things is the way it changes how you think about the org and the way you solve problems and gather help.’**

**‘The importance of ALS is the way it changes the way you think and the opportunity you give to think and solve problems. I think they are incredibly worthwhile.’**

A set member stated that the most important outcome for their organisation was *‘slowing down my thinking... what we are doing organisationally is better as a result of being involved.’*

#### **4. Personal growth**

A majority of participants also cited their own professional and personal growth as an unexpected benefit of the process.

**‘I was able to properly reflect... and maybe overcome elements of self-doubt.’**

This had the knock-on effect of supporting practitioners to pursue accountability for rights violations they come across in their work.

**‘Confidence has been a huge part of this process. I’ve learnt to speak up... But now I have a voice people can listen to and I can advocate for people.’**

**‘It’s made me able to approach the local authority, at a senior level and say this is what you need to be doing to support people... the biggest thing being the confidence and the knowledge about where I can go. [Other set member] was really good at this, I learnt from them.’**

# CONCLUSIONS



## Key learning about human rights and anti-poverty work

The work of anti-poverty organisations is fundamentally human rights work, and organisations need to be supported and encouraged to see it as such and to use human rights frameworks. This is particularly important given the changing human rights context in Scotland.

When asked whether taking part in the process had supported them to advance economic, social and cultural rights, all set members said yes and many noted they now fundamentally saw their work as being human rights work.

Human rights can be communicated meaningfully in a community setting. However, human rights language and concepts need to be translated and applied at the local level to make human rights feel relevant and rights-realisation feel possible, particularly to those furthest from rights realisation. Community members are the perfect communicators for this task. Formal training is only one component of supporting and empowering local communicators.

## Learning for human rights educators and action learning facilitators

Learning is deepened when more time is put aside for organisations to explicitly map their work to internationally defined rights, UN articles, and human rights principles. The notion that human rights are too lofty or academic can be reduced by spending time doing this. This is something that was embedded more deeply into the project's second action learning set, due to feedback suggesting this would have been helpful in the first set.

It is important to make continued and consistent explicit linkages to human rights in terms of key articles, the principles of taking a human rights-based approach, and the tools that support us to do this. Using new tools and language is a step change in ways of working, and as facilitators we need to continually bring this to the fore. This requires ALS facilitators to take a slightly different approach in bringing these issues out in questions, reflections, and other activities carried out by the group. This was key learning that the project team have now taken forward to a second action learning set process.

Peer support and sustained learning in combination is vitally important in the anti-poverty sector, particularly when making changes to practice. Organisations are working at the hard end of human rights failures in Scotland, and being supported by others in the same situation was noted by each participant as a deeply beneficial experience.



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