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Ensuring Economic and Social Rights

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At the 2004 meetings of the World Social Forum, Arundhati Roy told us that

to imagine that a leader's personal charisma and a c.v. of struggle will dent the corporate cartel is to have no understanding of how capitalism works, or for that matter, how power works. Radical change will not be negotiated by governments; it can only be enforced by people. (Democracy Now! 2004)

As long as people do not take steps to ensure economic and social rights, persons of economic and social privilege will have greater influence over how the world is shaped than the rest. Economic rights, such as the rights to be free from economic oppression, to work, to have fair labor standards, and to earn a decent living, are necessary in order for all persons to have an equal chance of personal fulfillment and agency. The rights to food, housing, health, and education serve to reduce inequality and flatten authority structures that are incompatible with the goals that these rights assert.

International law already protects many of these rights. For instance, the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) (see Box 3.1), the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and agreements from the International Labour Organization (ILO) all speak to the universality

and inalienability of these rights. ILO Social Policy Convention 117 states that “the improvement of standards of living shall be regarded as the principal objective in the planning of economic development.” Economic and social rights are human rights that each individual is born with. Grassroots activists around the world, many without much formal education, know exactly when it is that their economic and social rights are being violated and when economic development is undertaken that does not improve the standard of living of most people. Even without training in the details of international human rights law, many activists defend their rights when states, corporations, or armed groups violate them. To them, human rights are bound up in fighting against injustice and inequality. They realize that economic and social rights do not exist without mobilizing to *ensure* that they are in place.

BOX 3.1: ICESCR

PART III

Article 6

I. The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right to work, which includes the right of everyone to the opportunity to gain his living by work which he freely chooses or accepts, and will take appropriate steps to safeguard this right.

[...]

The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to the enjoyment of just and favourable conditions of work which ensure, in particular:

- (a) Remuneration which provides all workers, as a minimum, with:
 - (i) Fair wages and equal remuneration for work of equal value without distinction of any kind, in particular women being guaranteed conditions of work not inferior to those enjoyed by men, with equal pay for equal work;
 - (ii) A decent living for themselves and their families in accordance with the provisions of the present Covenant;
- (b) Safe and healthy working conditions;
- (c) Equal opportunity for everyone to be promoted in his employment to an appropriate higher level, subject to no considerations other than those of seniority and competence;

- (d) Rest, leisure and reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay, as well as remuneration for public holidays

Article 8

1. The States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to ensure:

- (a) The right of everyone to form trade unions and join the trade union of his choice, subject only to the rules of the organization concerned, for the promotion and protection of his economic and social interests. No restrictions may be placed on the exercise of this right other than those prescribed by law and which are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of national security or public order or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others;

[...]

- (d) The right to strike, provided that it is exercised in conformity with the laws of the particular country.

2. This article shall not prevent the imposition of lawful restrictions on the exercise of these rights by members of the armed forces or of the police or of the administration of the State.

[...]

Article 9

The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to social security, including social insurance.

[...]

Article 11

1. The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions. The States Parties will take appropriate steps to ensure the realization of this right, recognizing to this effect the essential importance of international co-operation based on free consent.

2. The States Parties to the present Covenant, recognizing the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger, shall take, individually and through international co-operation, the measures, including specific programmes, which are needed.

The current economic conditions in the United States draw urgency to the necessity of economic and social rights. Throughout history, individuals and communities in the United States have fought for their social and economic rights. I note the lessons we might learn from those examples of ordinary people standing up to authorities in defense of their economic and social rights.

Contemporary Social Conditions

In 2008, the New York Stock Exchange experienced a severe decline in the value of its stocks, leaving millions of people out of work. Economists have labeled this stock market crash as the worst in the United States since the Great Depression that began with the 1929 crash of the market. As most economic downturns operate, the financial sector recovered its profits far more quickly than the labor market began to accept new workers, and at press time, it was still not clear that the worst was over. The U.S. government has been defending the capitalist free market for many years. Yet, when this system failed in 2008, the government bailed out the financial industry with billions of dollars, while imposing austerity measures against workers and vulnerable populations at federal, state, and local levels across the country. This enormous intervention into the financial system illustrates that the financial industry has stronger leverage over the U.S. government than the citizens and workers that compose the country. Why were ordinary U.S. citizens and workers not protected? Why was there no economic bailout for the millions of workers who lost their jobs? Where was the relief for the millions of swindled homeowners?

The Grassroots Option

An effective human rights policy must be enforced by strong community organizations. While the government may pass legislation that may be to the liking of domestic human rights organizations, such gains may be eroded or not enforced if community organizations are not sufficiently engaged. Ultimately, it is up to these community organizations to monitor and enforce social and economic rights.

Citizens, and not the state, are also under the obligation to enforce public democracy and autonomous development. Community organizations are most effective when all stakeholders feel that their concerns have been heard and considered, if not implemented. The creation and strengthening of these

local democratic spaces is the responsibility of common citizens. Development, a phenomenon that community organizations commonly consider to be an action undertaken by corporations, should also be primarily the responsibility of local community organizations. Small businesses are more accountable to local communities and, thus, better serve the needs and interests of those communities in which they are embedded.

In order to enhance the strength of local community groups so that such actions can be undertaken, more resources are needed for local community organizing initiatives, and more spaces for local civic dialogue must be established that create accountability and governance structures that serve local interests. Citizens must be willing to make time for public service, not as a charitable gesture but rather in their own interest as it is bound with their local community. The success of local priorities, such as increasing the availability of affordable housing for instance, depends on the strength of community organizations.

Everyone needs housing, and local community organizations can be most effective when they work to further these universal needs with other communities. One conduit for such community linkages has been the labor movement. Communities can establish strategic partnerships with local labor movements on common issues, particularly around the right to work. Many labor movements have organizations that have already established partnerships around labor issues. By further engaging these structures, community organizations can access new linkages, and labor organizations can also obtain new allies for the right to work for a living wage.

Some indigenous communities in the United States have strong community organizations. Bounded together by a common culture, language, and history, these community groups do so by necessity, both for the preservation of their own histories and to effectively resist challenges to their sovereignty. Just as these indigenous communities have formed such strong ties and have resisted external structures of authority from imposing new realities upon them, so too can other local communities learn from these successful strategies to increase the degree of control that they have over their jurisdictions.

Autonomous movements in the United States provide a source for inspiration. These are movements that defend community rights on their own terms. It is more difficult for private interests to corrupt disparate local communities and movements than it is for them to influence a central government. Also, each community is different and will adopt these programs and initiatives differently, according to its needs, so long as human rights are respected.

In 1965, Filipino and Mexican American farmworkers went on strike for the rights of migrant laborers in a California community. One of the demands was recognition of what became the United Farm Workers union. They also organized a consumer boycott of grapes, in protest over their treatment. Cesar Chavez played a pivotal role during the campaign, which lasted five years before the workers' demands were met. Migrant workers are a growing population in the United States, and Latinos are an increasingly growing demographic. Yet migrant workers continue to face problems, particularly with deportations and estrangement from their families. Indeed, Article 10 of ILO Social Policy Convention 82 states, "Where the circumstances under which workers are employed involve their living away from their homes, the terms and conditions of their employment shall take account of their normal family needs" (see Box 3.2). Local communities could use these and other important elements of this ILO convention to protect their local workers and local economies.

BOX 3.2: ILO SOCIAL POLICY CONVENTION 82

Article 11

Where the labour resources of one area of a non-metropolitan territory are used on a temporary basis for the benefit of another area, measures shall be taken to encourage the transfer of part of the workers' wages and savings from the area of labour utilisation to the area of labour supply.

[...]

Where workers and their families move from low-cost to higher-cost areas, account shall be taken of the increased cost of living resulting from the change.

Source: <http://www.ilo.org/ilolex/english/convdisp1.htm>.

Chavez's partner, Dolores Huerta, who was also integral to the boycott, has argued that one major hurdle for such grassroots mobilizing is the parochialism among social movements in the United States. Economic and social rights encompass a wide range of movement goals, and Huerta thinks that broad swaths of movements against economic and social domination should link together. The Dolores Huerta Foundation is one such organization that advocates such an approach.

Some issues may seem like they have nothing to do with each other. For instance, the “slow food” movement is one that supports local farmers and food that is grown locally. This is done through what are called Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) partnerships between consumers and farmers, or between local stores and farmers. This keeps the costs of transportation of food low, food that can sometimes come from thousands of miles away, consuming tons of carbon-emitting gases in the process.

What does the slow food movement have to do with other economic and social rights movements, such as the racial desegregation of neighborhoods? There are always connections between all of these movements that are not often acknowledged. Michelle Obama has brought attention to the issue of our food system in the United States. Obesity is a problem, particularly among youth, and this can be changed through a change in our eating cultures. Many of the people who are most obese are blacks and Latinos. However, the places with the highest concentration of CSA partnerships are mostly white. Because neighborhoods are often segregated, this exacerbates problems of both obesity and segregation.

There are more linkages between movements than we often allow ourselves to recognize. It is reasonable to organize around a single issue, focusing on accomplishing a single goal. However, the structures of society that oppress the most vulnerable remain intact after incremental changes to individual issues. Nevertheless, the rubric of economic and social human rights allows communities to link these issues and to develop a broader platform.

What does it mean to do grassroots organizing? This involves getting together with others in one’s community to identify what the problems are. In the early years of the women’s movement, women’s groups formed to discuss mutual experiences of violence or mistreatment. These groups eventually formed the backbone of a vast grassroots movement. The issue that a local community might decide to intervene in could be unemployment, housing, environmental degradation, the quality of the drinking water, or low wages. Once a community group gathers information and decides what the problems are, group members can begin to brainstorm about what is to be done. Then, the community can identify allies and stakeholders. It is long and hard work, but it can be gratifying and rewarding.

Grassroots organizing has historically accomplished much, but sometimes communities might decide that they want to join with other communities in order to change a state or federal law. Laws cannot fix everything, but sometimes they can be tactically useful in the short term. That is where public policy can come in handy. Communities, however, are ultimately responsible for ensuring that laws are implemented, enforced, patrolled, and upheld.

Economic and social rights are urgently needed in the United States in order to emancipate workers and citizens from the financial industry that has come to dominate U.S. society. However, these rights have been understood primarily in litigious terms. It should be understood that meaningful economic and social rights will not be granted—they must be demanded. Communities ought not to wait for the “right” politician or leader to come along. We can do it ourselves. While the study of human rights law has been dominated by lawyers, the study of society and social change is done by sociologists.

In 2004, Arundhati Roy delivered the keynote address at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, reminding sociologists of what is at stake. Sociologists have studied economic and social inequality in the United States for decades, accumulating and analyzing reams of data. For this reason, sociology is uniquely poised to identify these levers of social change. The struggle for human rights in the United States cannot rely exclusively on government structures, structures that are resistant to acknowledge these rights. We must achieve these rights ourselves.

The current dominance of law in the field of human rights is useful because it identifies the legal strategies for implementing sound rights. It is limited in that it only focuses on the juridical process, without recognizing the sociological determination of how societies change. Laws alone do not create change. Grassroots movements must demand and advocate for these laws, and force structures of authority, such as governments, corporations, and armed groups, to enforce them and to prosecute those who violate them. There must be consequences to the violation of these rights if governments and other “authorities” do not uphold these rights, consequences that only grassroots pressure can give birth to.

Human rights are not limited to what the courts can arbitrate. Moreover, even law is rooted in the ethical character of society. As Robert Alexy (2010) has argued, even some constitutional provisions stem from ethical principles rather than from laws. While human rights should be sought through the legal code, its depth and strength depend on the ethical character of societies and communities. The cultural shifts on which laws depend are formed by communities through social change processes. As Kenneth Andrews (2004) argued, even in the U.S. African American civil rights movement, local laws changed to reflect the success of the social movement several years before the passage of the civil rights acts. These changes were strongest, Andrews argues, in communities in which the movement was most organized.

Human rights are a social phenomenon, developed through interactions between mobilized communities and legal and government institutions. While lawyers wield opinions related to nation-state discourses, sociologists can wield facts about such societies and the interactions within them.

Institutions deliver and mitigate rights, and cultures complicate them—dynamics better understood by sociologists.

Sociologists also have the advantage of having evidence and data for their positions on human rights. Because sociologists have long documented the structures that reproduce inequality, they know how immutable these structures can be in the absence of concerted and intentional effort on the part of ordinary people. Their command of data makes it more difficult to deny the inequality, leaving open to debate only what should be done about it.

Data

As Blau et al. (2008) argue in *The Leading Rogue State*, while most countries have made considerable advances in acknowledging the inalienable social and economic rights of all people, the United States has not. Several metrics show that where the United States was a leader in human rights measures, it has now fallen behind other industrialized nations.

The Gini coefficient¹ for the United States has grown steadily ever since 1950, showing a widening gap between the rich and the poor. This means that the United States was once one of the most equal countries in the world—having the smallest difference in income between the rich and the poor. Today, however, the United States is among the most unequal among the rich countries.

The Center for American Progress keeps track of the number of international charters ratified by different countries. The United States has the lowest number of ratified treaties among G20 nations (Schultz 2009). The United States has not even ratified one of the most important, the ICESCR. Although President Jimmy Carter signed the treaty, Congress has refused to ratify it, stating that its provisions are a social goal rather than an inalienable right.

The Global Peace Index compiles several indicators to show which countries are moving toward a more peaceful society. The United States ranks poorly. The 2009 ranking for the United States fell sharply due to Guantánamo Bay and the treatment of Arabs and Muslims in the United States (Institute for Economics and Peace 2010). This erosion of rights for those who are not valued by society undermines the rights of every citizen.

Human rights are often thought of as something that is needed in other countries, when in fact the need is urgent in the United States. The failure to recognize the right to housing, for instance, has led to severe homelessness in communities such as Camden, New Jersey, one of the poorest communities in the United States. Even the District of Columbia sees stark inequality and homelessness. According to the Center for Economic and Social Rights (2010), 20.6 percent of U.S. children were living in poverty in 2009. This is

very high, over one in five children, when compared with countries in the same income bracket as the United States. This is unusual for a country in the highest economic income bracket. Additionally, according to 2010 World Bank data, the United States also has a very high infant mortality rate compared to other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries. As long as the United States is not investing in children, its future economic growth outlook is poor.

The Gender Equity Index, compiled by Social Watch (2009), measures inequality between men and women, placing the United States in 25th place. And although gender equity in the United States has improved, women continue to earn less than men for conducting the same work. The Happy Planet Index, which measures countries based on a composite of indicators indicating a high quality of life and happiness, also has consistently given the United States a low ranking (New Economics Foundation 2010).

When U.S. citizens are asked whether they support specific economic or social rights, they always say they do. In a public opinion poll in 2006, 75 percent of respondents thought that people should have the right to work. When U.S. citizens are asked more generally about human rights, most people are quite supportive of the main tenets of human rights. When asked where the following phrase comes from—"From each according to their ability, to each according to their need"—most citizens think that the phrase originates in the U.S. Constitution. They are right to believe that it should appear in the Constitution, but no such idea appears there; that statement belongs instead to philosopher Karl Marx.² Twenty-nine percent of Americans also have "a positive reaction to the word *socialism*," according to a May 2010 Pew Research Center poll. The percentage is even higher, 43 percent, among people under the age of 30, 48 percent of whom, by the same token, have a negative reaction to the word *capitalism*. In an April 2010 Rasmussen poll, only 53 percent of Americans said that capitalism is preferable to socialism. Those under 30 are split nearly equally: 37 percent preferring capitalism, 33 percent preferring socialism, and 30 percent undecided.

How could it be that people in the United States live in such poor economic and social conditions? People who live in the United States do not always realize that this is the case, because they are not as aware about conditions in other countries. Those in the United States often believe that because they live in the richest country in the world, they must live in the best conditions and enjoy the most freedoms in the world. There are many great things about U.S. culture and the stability of the political system. But as Blau and Moncada (2006) have argued, "Patriotism, like nationalism, impedes the comprehension of the human rights we all share" (p. 46). National reverie must be balanced with

global awareness. The social conditions in which we find ourselves in the United States demand an intervention.

A New Bill of Rights

The United States once was a leader in human rights, having housed the United Nations since its inception. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the central treaty of the United Nations, was drafted by Eleanor Roosevelt, a U.S. First Lady. In the decades since then, the United States has lost its leadership. The country has lost its way to the extent that it has been referred to by some observers as the “leading rogue state” (Blau et al. 2008). In order to reverse this trend, ordinary citizens must organize around economic and social rights and demand them from the government.

A U.S. political philosopher and grassroots political leader in the Northeast, Malcolm X advocated for the right to work, the right to self-determination, and the freedom from discrimination. He believed in these principles so deeply that he took the United States to the United Nations over these demands. Box 3.3 illustrates how Malcolm X and his movement demanded exactly this. Malcolm X and many others like him have organized at the grassroots level on behalf of economic and social rights. Earlier in the twentieth century, and after decades of intense battle, workers finally achieved the 8-hour workday and 40-hour workweek. Today, even these basic gains have been eroded.

One amendment in a New Bill of Rights that might be considered is one that was introduced by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1944. In what Roosevelt called the “Second Bill of Rights,” he argued that Congress should pass a set of laws that protected social and economic rights in ways that had never been seen before. Eleanor Roosevelt, and the grassroots movements budding around the president’s feet, forced his hand.

Some 80 years later, it is necessary that we codify these rights. But this will not occur without building the strength of community organizations to the levels at which they were in the 1930s and 1940s, or even the 1960s. These rights can be adopted and upheld in our own communities, spreading and growing at the grassroots level until they can no longer be ignored by the government.

It is possible for these rights to be advocated for from the very top of the government. Eleanor Roosevelt advocated for these rights and spent her focus on developing community action. Roosevelt (1948) was so effective in this advocacy work that black women all over the South founded community groups called “Eleanor Clubs” in her honor, which strove to adopt human rights provisions locally. The international human rights movement

BOX 3.3: ECONOMIC RIGHTS: THE RIGHT TO WORK***Malcolm X and the “Ballot or the Bullet” Speech***

In 1964, Malcolm X delivered one of the most memorable speeches in American history before a Methodist congregation in Cleveland, Ohio. In “The Ballot or the Bullet,” Malcolm X spoke of the necessity to expand the African American civil rights movement to the international stage:

When you expand the civil-rights struggle to the level of human rights, you can then take the case of the black man in this country before the nations in the UN [United Nations]. You can take it before the General Assembly. You can take Uncle Sam before a world court. But the only level you can do it on is the level of human rights. Civil rights keeps you under his restrictions, under his jurisdiction. Civil rights keeps you in his pocket. Civil rights means you’re asking Uncle Sam to treat you right. Human rights are something you were born with. Human rights are your God-given rights. Human rights are the rights that are recognized by all nations of this earth. And any time any one violates your human rights, you can take them to the world court.

Malcolm X understood that these rights could not be undertaken under U.S. law the way that the law is currently written. He emphasized the importance of people organizing themselves in order to ensure these rights.

Source: <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=1147>

began with Roosevelt in the United States, and the democratic ideals of the United States were eventually embraced by other nations. Contemporaneously, not only have other countries caught up, but they have waged ahead. The United States should once again be motivated to play an active leadership role, in partnership with other countries, in the enforcement of economic and social rights.

Another club and community group founded was the Highlander Folk School (now the Highlander Research and Education Center), which trained and educated many of the people who went on to become leaders in the U.S. African American civil rights movement, including Martin Luther King Jr. Many local labor leaders were also trained here, who then went on to work in the South and the Midwest. In Chapter 12, Judith Blau discusses the Carrboro Human Rights Center, a similar endeavor to empower a local

community, this one heavily Latino. There ought to be more such community schools as the Human Rights Center and the Highlander Folk School that address local issues and train people in addressing the problems that plague local communities through grassroots activism and empowerment.

To take an example from a nearby country, Colombia has one of the oldest democracies in the world. Inspired by George Washington and the American Revolution, General Simon Bolivar and his armies overthrew their Spanish colonizers to create the free country we now know as Colombia. Colombia has been a strong U.S. ally in South America for several decades. It is where we get much of our coffee and flowers and emeralds, and even some of our oil and coal. But even this country, which has a much lower gross domestic product than the United States, has stronger economic and social rights laws.

Just as Colombia has been influenced by us, so too can we learn from its legal advances. Colombia has made these advances because of pressure from grassroots social organizations. Eventually, the pressure from grassroots groups became so great that the government had to give in and rewrite the country's constitution in 1991, acknowledging social and economic rights, among others. Box 3.4 illustrates some of these victories.

BOX 3.4: EXCERPT FROM THE 1991 COLOMBIAN CONSTITUTION

The following are basic rights of children: life, physical integrity, health and social security, a balanced diet, their name and citizenship, to have a family and not be separated from it, care and love, instruction and culture, recreation, and the free expression of their opinions. They will be protected against all forms of abandonment, physical or moral violence, imprisonment, sale, sexual abuse, work or economic exploitation, and dangerous work. (Article 44)

Source: http://confinder.richmond.edu/admin/docs/colombia_const2.pdf.

How Others Have Done It

One hundred years ago, many U.S. citizens did not even have civil and political rights (such as the right to vote), let alone economic and social rights. The abolition movement set to change that by struggling for the rights of nonwhites. The NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of

Colored People) looks very different now than it did a century ago. Back then, local chapters across the country were rooted in strong communities that organized according to the needs that arose in local contexts. There was a branch of the NAACP that coordinated and created national policy, but there was often tension between the central office and the local chapters. This was because communities ran and held their local chapters accountable to the people of the communities, and if the central NAACP was not tending to those needs, then it was sometimes simply ignored. Communities today should hold the organizations to which they belong to similar standards.

All U.S. citizens learn about Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement of the 1960s in grammar school. However, even this movement was successful not because of its great leaders, but because of the strong local communities and visionary local organizers that played a catalytic role. These organizers included Ella Baker, who tirelessly traveled between communities to organize people and to have them registered to vote. Baker famously said, “Strong people don’t need strong leaders” (Center for Constitutional Rights 2011). She encouraged autonomous community groups for the training of local organizers. It was efforts from Baker and the hundreds of other local organizers that helped give the civil rights movement backbone and kept the leadership from negotiating away too much too quickly. A simple idea, and the will of a community to follow that idea, is all that is needed in order to make change possible.

This is essential for *ensuring* economic and social rights because the regulatory mechanisms for ensuring these rights are strong communities. Even if the political structures in the United States were to pass—for instance, Roosevelt’s Second Bill of Rights—economic pressures would ensure that these rights would be weakly enforced and quickly dissolved without the counterbalance that strong communities provide.

For instance, in the South during the late nineteenth century, an organization called the Farmers’ Alliance formed an independent economic system in order to become independent from imposed inflated prices for jute (a kind of twine used to bundle hay). The Great Jute Boycott involved farmers in the South who banded together and even ran their own political candidates in order to obtain leverage over their competitors and to improve and invest in their own communities.

In the Tulsa, Oklahoma, of the early twentieth century, blacks banded together to form their own economic structures in order to not have to depend on whites. This “Black Wall Street,” as it was called, diversified the control over economic structures in the community. This decentralization over the control of resources is imperative to reduce the potential for the abuse of power of any one group over another. The example shows that

local communities construct economic and social rights, rather than economic and social rights being granted by governments.

Local communities are important in every successful movement. In the Flint Sit-Down Strike of 1936–1937, General Motors workers took over the automobile factories in order to protest cuts in wages. However, the strike would have never been successful without local community support. Local grocers extended credit to families who were affected by the strike, local bakers provided free or cheap bread, and workers from the surrounding area came to their aid. The relationship went both ways, with workers supporting local stores so that big bad chains would not put them out of business. However, these interdependent relationships cannot happen without strong communities that recognize the value of these relationships and how they help maintain local autonomy. This local autonomy is important for maintaining the decentralization of power that keeps authorities accountable.

Movements in other countries have already acknowledged that local autonomy across movements and linkages across movement issues are essential for ensuring economic and social rights. The alter-globalization movement, which took hold in 1999 in Seattle, Washington, has made people more aware that the decisions that we make about how we live our lives in the United States have impacts that we do not always see elsewhere. This insight has engendered transnational alliances across national boundaries on common issues for social rights and economic rights. Marriage equity is being implemented across the western hemisphere, in part due to these linkages. In 2010, Argentina became the first country in Latin America to allow gay marriage. The World Social Forum, which began in Brazil, comprises transnational collaborations that bring activists together to discuss ways in which grassroots movements can deepen human rights in the Global South. We can leverage these victories to push further, for instance, for the right for everyone to have a living wage.

None of these victories come easily. *Structures of authority* block these kinds of grassroots efforts in order to protect their private interests, rather than serving the public interest. This is unfortunate, but it has always been the case. Grassroots efforts obtain and defend laws and other gains in the public interest. Capitalism, and other such structures, can and do erode our rights when communities are not mobilized.

Intellectual Contributions

Several intellectual thinkers and movements have contributed to this emancipatory strategy to ensure economic and social rights. The Fabians were a group of British intellectuals who believed that society could be fixed,

but to do so required respecting the rights of individuals. Even though equality was a founding principle of the U.S. Constitution in 1776, it was still a radical idea 125 years later in twentieth-century London! They were called the “Fabians” after the Roman general Fabius, who held off the invading Hannibal by simply not engaging his armies. Hannibal relied on mercenaries who were not loyal to him unless they had the ability to plunder localities. But once they had exhausted the resources surrounding Rome, these mercenaries became restless and would mutiny. It was a war of attrition, with Fabius simply waiting, strategically exploiting Hannibal’s weakness.

The British Fabians used indirect methods to influence politics, using education, traveling public lectures, and literature. They fundamentally believed that it was possible for civil society to demand such rights from the government and, over the course of many years, contributed to the movement that secured these rights for Britons.

Economic rights without social rights are not acceptable—they cannot be separately advocated for, since ensuring one depends on the relative strength of the other. As Nancy Fraser (1997), a contemporary political philosopher, argues, economic remuneration is not enough: People also seek recognition. Economic equality cannot be achieved unless all groups are protected and are recognized as legitimate and valued by society. Likewise, economic parity depends on our mutual recognition of each other’s intrinsic value. For instance, the right to work cannot be ensured if Latinos do not have equal civil rights.

The interconnectedness of economic and social rights, as evidenced by international movements, is also consistent with what Emmanuel Levinas (1998), a twentieth-century philosopher, argued: People have an intrinsic responsibility to each other, and actions that do not reflect this reality are not only unethical because they do not recognize this value, but they are even *irrational!* Indeed, as our society becomes increasingly interdependent, this reality becomes ever truer.

Moving Forward

One important distinction between the domestic and international human rights movements is that movements abroad tend to be united on a slate of issues, recognizing this interconnectedness between economic and social rights. In the United States, movements and organizations tend to focus on one issue at a time—for instance, banning the use of land mines or campaigning against female genital mutilation. In grassroots movements abroad, these issues are linked and striven for according to a broader plank of human rights.

Movement parochialism in the United States unnecessarily sacrifices the networked relationships that so often lead to success in similar movements abroad. This is due to the funding structure in the United States. Foundations often are very specific about the kinds of issues that they would like to see addressed, itemizing exactly how monies are to be spent. These funding practices are often undemocratic. Movements need to create distance from these systems, communities must demand that grant-making agencies be held accountable for their decisions, and the federal government should regulate this industry, which acts without abandon. Undemocratic and unaccountable grant-making institutions are neither necessary nor sufficient for ensuring economic and social rights. They centralize authority among elites rather than enabling local communities to work on local priorities.

How is this to be accomplished? These can seem like insurmountable tasks. However, no structures of authority last forever. Persistent activists have constantly claimed victory over seemingly immutable realities.

A multipronged approach that attacks at different structural points in society may be promising. Lobbying at the federal, state, and local levels is necessary to create pressure for change. But I have emphasized in this chapter local action for a reason: It has been the case in the last 40 years in the United States that social movement activists have increasingly focused on federal and state action. However, we forget that these government structures rely on local communities to validate them. This power has been underutilized, at our own peril.

At the local level, there are Human Rights Cities, municipalities that pass human rights ordinances that recognize enforcement mechanisms for pieces of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. They also put funding into human rights centers that help to reduce inequality in localities. They provide public spaces for community events and meetings to identify needs in the community.

Communities can also make specific legislative demands, such as rent control. If it is not possible to issue these laws, then communities should look at creating solutions, such as forming joint ventures for cooperative apartment complexes with a board of directors that is locally accountable and that will adjust graduated rents according to community needs. Development initiatives, such as New Urbanism, with increased green spaces and town squares, are important trends. This movement should be made appropriate to local spaces with community needs so as not to create gentrification. The best way to do that is to make sure that local, grassroots stakeholders are central in the planning. The only way to make this happen is for movements to insist upon it.

Some communities in the United States and elsewhere have “local currencies,” which are attempts to keep money circulating in the community.

Usually, people can spend money at a store, and then that store can use that money in whichever way it sees fit—usually extracting the money from the community. When a store gives a consumer change after a purchase, that money can be taken by the consumer and used wherever he or she likes. The problem this creates is that sometimes money can be extracted from a community in the form of profits, without investing in the community. Local currencies attempt to circumvent this problem by having legal tender that is only valuable in a particular geographic zone. They have exchange rates, if one needs to convert dollars into the local currency, or vice versa. Some communities even have a community bank that specializes in this currency. Another advantage is that this strategy can insulate communities from the “boom and bust” cycles of Washington and Wall Street, bringing control of the local economy to the local community.

One other advantage of local currencies is that communities can give people who might not otherwise be productive something to do. This can create alternative and flexible employment for the currently unemployed. This can be expanded during times of crisis. It keeps people busy and creates bonds between people locally. Such jobs can include running errands for people in need or cleaning up public places or finding creative ways to match individuals’ trained skills with something the community could use. There is no need for communities to waste talent because of an externally controlled economic pressure. This control can be wielded locally.

At the federal level, communities should advocate for change to federal wage regulations. The current minimum wage is not sufficient for families. When the minimum wage was created, it was meant to be used for someone to be able to live on that salary. However, because this was never pegged to the rate of inflation of the price of consumer goods, the minimum wage has fallen drastically below what a person needs in order to subsist. The minimum wage needs to become a living wage, so that people can actually depend on their jobs.

Welfare reform under the Clinton administration was motivated by a desire to make people work for the payments they receive. For this reason, many places, including New York, created workfare programs for people to get paid in return for doing work for the city. But there were many labor mobilizations against these efforts. Workfare did not work for most people. Instead, the city wielded workfare as a mechanism with which to cut costs (Krinsky 2007).

Instead of workfare, the role of civil servants could be expanded to create a development corps. These civil servants, paid by tax dollars, would create grassroots development projects. These projects would be funded by the state but planned and undertaken by local communities, according to the

needs that they feel address their communities and with the assistance of members of the development corps.

A strengthening of regulatory agencies that control the size and authority of corporate entities is also an important goal that communities may consider when looking toward federal policy. Because such a campaign would meet strong opposition from private interests, it is important for local communities to be organized and ready for the potential disruption that this may entail. As Piven and Cloward (1977) argue, it is grassroots organizations that disrupt structures that are the agents of economic change. With the help of federal regulators, these communities may be more successful.

So long as communities support the government, they should also advocate for increased government transparency, so that communities are better able to do their work of holding government accountable. If communities do not have access to information, then they cannot act upon that information. As Javier Auyero and Debora Swistun (2008) showed how, in an environmentally devastated neighborhood in Buenos Aires, Argentina, members of the local community did not mobilize against pollution because they did not have access to the correct information about the environmental pollutants in their community. This “toxic uncertainty” paralyzed potential movements. Communities in the United States can overcome this by insisting on transparency and disclosure of environmental or other effects of government and corporate activity.

In the global economy, the free market has led to the opening up of borders for capital markets. People can trade money and goods across borders without fees and without restrictions. The problem with this is that people do not have these same freedoms, so capital can move from one place to another, moving jobs to other countries. However, people are stuck. Money is free to move around the world, but people are not. This is why we need to globalize people, granting everyone the ability to move freely around the world for work and livelihood, just as capital can. Also, because communities have roots, and people have roots, capital should also be given roots and be restricted through local currencies and other initiatives to reflect the extent to which people are limited in their willingness to chase jobs around the world. The democratic solution could emerge as something akin to the United Nations, but with delegates that are democratically elected from different regions in the world, rather than appointed by and beholden to government structures of authority.

Conclusion

Ensuring economic and social rights requires the development of a strategic agenda. Too often, single-issue movements arise as a reaction to an acute

injustice. Strong communities are essential for instilling the values of economic and social justice from the ground up. This way, communities can vet and judge the proposals and initiatives that arise according to already existing values that uphold economic and social rights.

Not all of these strategies need to be taken on at the same time or by any one individual or community. Individuals and groups will gravitate toward certain ideas that are the most compelling at a particular time and place. Some of the specific ideas discussed here may not speak to certain communities at all. This reflects the diversity of individuals and communities in the United States, each of which has important gifts that can be used in some way in service of protecting our fellow residents by obtaining economic and social rights. What is important is that we do something, anything, to make this a reality.

Discussion Questions

1. Why can't communities rely on governments to ensure economic and social rights?
2. Why do communities need economic and social rights?
3. How do social movements help to ensure economic and social rights?
4. Do you think Franklin Delano Roosevelt or Eleanor Roosevelt had more impact on ensuring economic and social rights? Why?
5. What does the author mean by "structures of authority" blocking grassroots initiatives for economic and social rights?
6. What else can communities do to ensure economic and social rights that the author failed to mention?

Notes

1. The Gini coefficient is a measure of inequality that sociologists and economists commonly use in studies of inequality.
2. Poll on Constitution, *Boston Globe Magazine*, September 13, 1987, cited by Julius Lobel, in Julius Lobel, ed., "A Less than Perfect Union" (*Monthly Review*, 1988, p. 3).

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