

Active Participation in Human Rights Conference

4-5 June 2011 - Statement of purpose

The conference aims to provide a space to continue the discussions on the ethics of human rights research, advocacy and campaigning that were started at the ‘Responsibility to the Story’¹ conference, held at York University in 2009.² **It will bring together human rights practitioners to explore examples, possibilities and challenges of ‘active participation’ within human rights research, advocacy and campaigning**

Active Participation is an empowering and enabling process through which Rights Holders participate in and influence the processes and decisions which affect their lives in order to gain recognition and attainment of their Human Rights.

‘Active participation’ will be explored in relation to Community Based Organisations (CBOs), grass roots and large international Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), in order to identify the best ways to conceptualise participation.

In theory, ‘active participation’ can enhance human rights work by:

- a) Ensuring that the work of human rights organisations demonstrates a realisation of human rights principles (giving value and respect to rights-holder voices and knowledge).
- b) Encouraging discussions around human rights as engrained in understandings of local context.
- c) Increasing rights-holders’ sense of ownership over the outcomes of human rights work and encouraging rights-holders to become active agents.

Participation is engrained within international human rights treaties as a core rights-based concept.³ However, legal frameworks are not the only reference point, and we can look to local contexts and/or the histories, scholarship and practice of adjacent fields. Examples of ‘active participation’ can be found within transitional justice,⁴ human rights/ transformative education and developmental approaches.⁵ In fact, this poses an interesting question – should we be looking to integrate participation within human rights organisations on the international legal framework reference points or different reference point?

‘Active participation’ has not been absent from human rights work, but its use has not been well recorded, nor the subject of significant academic or professional exploration or critique.

¹ ‘Responsibility to the Story’ refers to an exploration of the responsibility we have to the stories we hear, process and tell.

² The conference resulted in a special edition of the Journal of Human Rights Practice (2010) – see volume 2(2).
<http://jhrp.oxfordjournals.org/content/2/2.toc>

³ For instance, the right of individuals to participate in public affairs is enshrined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, art. 25.

⁴ For example, see discussions around the involvement of victims/survivors within transitional justice mechanisms/processes.

⁵ ActionAid’s integration of the Reflect approach provides an apt example.

Scholarship and practice around participation has been most highly developed within the field of development. With an increased number of human rights organisations working on economic, social and cultural rights, the cross over between the traditional spheres of development and human rights work has increased the interest, use and evaluation of participatory methods across human rights work more broadly.

As a result, there is an exciting opportunity to share and discuss good practice and to debate some core questions that arise from viewing 'active participation' within the context of a broad range of human rights practice. Some core questions that underlie discussions around 'active participation' and human rights work include:

- Where, why and when are rights-holders currently participating in the design, implementation and evaluation of human rights advocacy, campaigning and capacity-building? Are there gaps in realising participatory approaches within human rights?
- Are there examples of good practice within human rights or adjacent fields that are transferrable to our own work?
- What does 'active participation' mean in the context of human rights research, advocacy and campaigning?
- What would we find if we applied the principles, methods and tools of 'active participation' more consistently to human rights work?
- What would 'active participation' mean for the way that human rights organisations and practitioners, plan, implement and evaluate their work?
- How do we respond to 'active participation' if it results in priorities and outcomes inconsistent with rights-based priorities/principles?
- Should participation extend our understanding of ethical practice (beyond 'do no harm' and informed consent) by increasing participant control over voice and representation?⁶
- Does 'active participation' present challenges to existing internal structures of human rights organisations? What kind of organisational changes might a lens on 'active participation' imply?

⁶ On this question see: Gready, P. (2010). Introduction – 'Responsibility to the Story'. *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, 2(2), 177-190.