

Grounding Rights-Based Understanding

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The [Community Foundation for Northern Ireland](#), with financial support from the Atlantic Philanthropies, piloted two separate grants programs to build appreciation of the importance of human rights and social justice among community-based organizations. The opportunity for a Human Rights Small Grants Scheme (with maximum grants of \$4,500) opened during the consultation period around a proposed Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland. Although provided for in the 1998 Belfast Agreement, the Bill became a divisive political issue.

During the consultation period from 2007 to 2011, the Community Foundation funded 122 groups to engage in discussions and activism on the concept of human rights. Participants represented diverse interests – including a range of sexualities and ethnic groups – and political perspectives. At the start, each participating group was asked to rate their understanding, knowledge, and experience of the rights debate and how it related to their lived experiences.

Participants completed a comparative assessment at the end of the program. Two messages emerged from these activities: the need for groups to address both misperceptions and alienation from a rights debate often seen as legalistic, partisan, and political in nature; but also a focus on how groups can relate positively to a broader culture of rights that includes social and economic rights.



What we found particularly effective in the Small Grants Scheme was offering mentor support to the grantees. The Community Foundation put out a call to identify potential mentors and commissioned a local human rights NGO, [Committee on the Administration of Justice](#), to provide training and ensure a level of quality control. Participating groups were able to select a mentor to best suit their needs. It was important that mentors' approaches be consistent to help groups challenge community-based misperceptions and address misunderstandings. The mentors identified further training opportunities in lobbying and advocacy skills for their groups and offered access to resources and information that community-based groups often lack.

Reflecting on the learning from our human rights program, the Community Foundation has shifted to a [Social Justice Small Grants Program](#). This program aims to ground a rights-based approach to community development, based on principles of human dignity, equality, fairness and respect for rights. While human rights and social justice are complementary in nature, a number of differences have been identified between the two approaches – with the latter being largely collective in emphasis and seeking to analyze and challenge all sources of power, in addition to the focus on state power. The Community Foundation's social justice approach looks beyond traditional civil and political rights to incorporate economic, social and cultural rights. While this proved controversial with many, including Unionist politicians, these latter issues speak to the lived experiences of a broad range of community-based groups across Northern Ireland, particularly those that were not previously engaged with the more politicized human rights debate. Coming from a community development ethos, it was important for the Community Foundation to 'start where people are at,'

and then to lead the reflection and conversation into more challenging areas, facilitated by the program mentors.

The social justice program adopts a similar methodology to the previous program, awarding small grants accompanied by the offer of mentor support. Taking lessons from the human rights program, the Community Foundation felt it was also important to challenge intra-community power-holders and continue to demand structural change. A Power Analysis ToolKit is in production – drawn from local learning – in order to facilitate community reflection and practice. Evaluation to date suggests that communities have rarely engaged in discussions framed through a social justice lens and, while not always comfortable, they found the resulting conversations ‘cathartic.’ The program gave the groups ‘permission’ to speak openly about a range of difficult issues: the control of power within community groups; how feelings of local disempowerment were framed in sectarian and/or racist terms; the lack of respect shown by decision-makers and politicians to people living in deprived communities; and feelings of ambivalence about the position of political ex-prisoners in the community, among others. Being able to speak freely about these issues, within a social justice framing, allowed people to raise concerns and find common ground.

Specific issues addressed included the Rainbow Project, examining relationships with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered members of immigrant communities, as well as negotiating with the Catholic/Nationalist/Republican Bogside community in Derry to paint the iconic ‘Free Derry Wall’ pink to raise awareness about homophobia. The Derry Anti-War Coalition examined how it might be able to address perceptions in a strong Unionist/Loyalist area to develop effective cross-community advocacy. Carnmedia, a community-based film company, used animation to promote the voices of young people in relation to priority rights issues, while the Carrickfergus Women’s Forum met with other women’s groups to examine key issues for women and develop an action plan to raise them with relevant policy-makers. However, equally important in the Northern Irish context were the linkages and networking that took place between groups and local communities otherwise positioned on different sides of the sectarian divide. Rights and social justice were highlighted as frameworks that could traverse differences of identity and constitutional politics – although not without difficulty at times.



For the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland, lessons as a grantmaker included the need to be prepared to frame grantmaking in a different manner. The Foundation adopted a combination of proactive and responsive approaches in order to focus on marginalized groups, but also realized that it is not enough to respond to well crafted grant applications alone, as often the most marginalized groups find it difficult to engage with standard application processes. The added dimension of mentor support was found to be essential to help groups and communities look beyond the standard narrative. Flexibility as a grantmaker was the order of the day, along with accepting that strategic grantmaking does not necessarily require large amounts of money, but it does require essential support staff to complement the standard grant awards.

The multi-layered dynamics of the social justice approach enable sensitive discussions around communities’ internal ‘gatekeeping’ and allow groups to examine relationships with the state and other statutory bodies. This is key in the links between social justice and community development.

Grounding a rights-based approach in the lived experience of a bitterly divided, and often socially conservative, society has been essential in order to show relevance and achieve buy-in from marginalized groups and communities. Concepts are important – but translating these into the potential for practical action is critical.

To learn more, please contact [Avila Kilmurray](#) or visit www.communityfoundationni.org.