

Plenet Empowerment Conference 2010 - The BIHR Poverty and Human Rights Project



About BIHR

We are an independent national charity aiming to bring human rights to life in the UK - in particular as a tool to promote social justice and tackle inequalities by:

- Raising awareness of human rights
- Building capacity to use human rights based approaches
- Influencing policy change

Context - human rights in the UK

- The prevailing attitude towards human rights amongst the general public, and driven by negative media coverage, is that human rights are only about unpopular groups.
- There is an extremely low awareness of human rights amongst UK civil society organisations in the UK. In particular how human rights can be used in advocacy/campaigning outside of the court room.
- The predominant messaging of civil society is based on a needs rather than a rights framework. This also links to funding, pragmatic campaigning and other related issues.
- The Conservative party are threatening to scarp the Human Rights Act.

Context - poverty in the UK

- Research has found that there are deeply held views amongst the public about the 'deserving poor' and the 'undeserving poor' (Killeen, JRF 2009). When people believe poverty exists they think this is generally the fault of the poor, and is down to their laziness or unwillingness to work.
- People experiencing poverty are often discriminated against both in terms of their ability to access public services and how they are treated when using these services.
- People experiencing poverty are more likely to face human rights abuses and are less likely to know what their rights are, and how to claim them.

Human rights based approaches

Starting point - all people have rights (including the most marginalised) and governments have duties to respect, protect and fulfil people's rights.

A human rights based approach:

- **Putting human rights principles and standards at the heart of policy and planning**
- Ensuring accountability
- Empowerment
- Participation and involvement
- Non-discrimination and attention to vulnerable groups

A human rights based approach to voluntary and community sector work

Reframing poverty issues as rights issues can help voluntary and community sector organisations to hold public bodies and the government to account for:

- Lack of provision of essential services
- Low standards in services
- Discrimination or other poor treatment when accessing public services.

A human rights based approach for people experiencing poverty

Knowing that you are entitled to a service (such as housing) or fair treatment rather than having to beg for assistance, fundamentally **changes the relationship of power** between a poor person and a government/public body. It enables people experiencing poverty to interact with the state as '**rights holder**', rather than passive recipients of charity or good will.

Human Rights and Poverty project

The project aims to help voluntary and community sector organisations working on poverty and social exclusion to understand and build skills in:

- Human rights and how to put these into practice using a human rights based approach
- Developing and delivering human rights based influencing activities (awareness-raising, advocacy, campaigning , lobbying)
- Identifying indicators or measures of change and progress.

Participating organisations

- Praxis
- Pecan
- Housing Justice
- Irish Traveller Movement in Britain
- London Refugee Voice
- Women in Prison

Support provided - raising awareness of rights

- **Providing** initial human rights training focusing on human rights principles and legislation including UN treaties, the European Convention of Human Rights and the Human Rights Act 1998.
- **Helping** organisations to identify:
 - A specific issue or area of work to apply human rights to
 - The key rights that this issue relates to, and
 - The public body which is responsible for protecting and promoting these rights
- **Supporting** organisations to develop confidence and relevant skills needed to initiate influencing activities, including skill based topics e.g. campaigning, working with the media, etc.
- **Evaluating** and sharing the learning (the successes and challenges) from the project and developing a useful model and relevant tools for other organisations working on poverty and related issues.

Examples of key issues

- A local authority waking homeless people in the middle of the night, conducting welfare checks and hosing down the areas where they are sleeping to prevent them from staying there
(Organisation: Housing Justice)
- Discrimination in provision of health and housing\accommodation services to the Irish Traveller community
(Organisation: Irish Traveller Movement in Britain)
- Social services refusing to support undocumented migrant families, threatening to take their children into care due to the family having no recourse to public funds
(Organisation: Praxis)
- Lack of joined up services resulting in high numbers of women becoming homeless on release from prison
(Organisation: Women in Prison)
- Developing a human rights coalition to address the low awareness of human rights amongst Refugee Community Organisations and the refugee sector generally
(Organisation: Refugee Voice)
- Working towards becoming a human rights based organisation: 'Human rights proofing' of organisational policies and procedures for services Pecan provides to a range of client groups
(Organisation: Pecan)

Discussion questions

- What is needed in order to build awareness, skills and knowledge in human rights/rights based approaches ?
- How to you think rights based approaches can be used to strengthen people's (in particular the most marginalised) voice/influence with policy makers ? What are the potential challenges ?
- Any key actions/recommendations for moving forward ?

Quote

'Where, after all, do universal human rights begin ? In small places, close to home - so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person; the neighbourhood he lives in, the school or college he attends; the factory, farm, or office where he works. Such are the places where every man, woman, and child seeks justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere.'

Eleanor Roosevelt