

Community Voices on Causes and Solutions of the Human Rights Crisis in the United States

A Living Document of the Human Rights at Home Campaign (First and Second Episodes)

Second Episode: Voices from the Northeast (June 2012)

The Northeastern Human Rights Dialogue was held on June 1-3 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The Northeastern Host Committee consisted of the Media Mobilizing Project (Pennsylvania), the National Economic and Social Rights Initiative, Poverty Initiative, United Workers (Maryland), and the Vermont Workers' Center (Vermont).

At the outset of the Dialogue, host committee organizations and other participating groups shared their experiences of using human rights in grassroots organizing. A delegation from Texas gave a report back from the Austin Dialogue held in January this year. Most of the weekend's discussions were dedicated to identifying the root causes underlying the various issue-based struggles and creating a unifying vision for change. Reflections on goals and strategies, both for the Human Rights at Home Campaign (HuRAH) and for individual organizations in their statewide struggles, concluded the weekend.

Our Goals

Throughout the weekend, participants sought to clarify what a collective movement building effort under the HuRAH umbrella would look like and what it would aim to achieve. They discussed the need to bring together diverse struggles to build a unified human rights movement in the United States. This would require taking issue-based campaigns and linking them to a systemic, overarching struggle and a collective vision. The human rights framework could be used to situate specific issues in a broader context. Human rights point to the importance of fundamental, systemic change, guided by principles, beyond advocacy for specific issues. Participants discussed that to achieve a broad, collective vision for a better society, we would need a people's movement for human rights that is both local and national.

How to achieve our goals:

- Embrace a broad human rights framework to gain strength, connect struggles and form a people's movement
- Build a vision and agenda for systemic change by connecting our issues
- Build the capacity to move our vision and agenda
 - support local efforts to organize people permanently
 - support building of community structures
- Win hearts and minds by playing to people's hopes instead of their fears
- Tell our stories in a way that challenges the current system

Our Strategy

The strategic components for building a national human rights movement can be found within the existing practices of many participating organizations. Participants highlighted the following elements in a discussion of models and emerging HuRAH campaign activities:

- Human rights framework: using human rights principles to situate issue-based campaigns in a broader context of systemic problems. HuRAH has developed principles that connect issues and groups and can help unify us.
- Organizing: creating communities that are permanently organized, not just fighting for one day. This requires developing leadership structures that allow people to grow and replicate. Work has begun to establish a HuRAH organizing institute to share organizing models and train organizers and leaders.
- Community structures: developing permanent local and regional structures that enable the strategic mobilization and connection of communities. These would be based on existing structures and expand those to become part of a broader process across the country.
- Movement communication: developing the movement's own narrative that projects our messages and that changes the discourse about root causes and solutions. This requires building shared capacity for communications and documenting the stories of our struggle locally, regionally, and nationally.

Our Analysis of Root Causes

Northeastern participants identified the underlying root causes of human rights denials by creating problem trees, working from symptoms (leaves) to causes (roots). They emphasized that this helped to overcome the usual reluctance of tackling the interconnected nature of problems. They noted that in their day-to-day activities many campaigners tended to pick the "smallest problem" and work on that instead of considering its systemic causes. This exercise enabled participants to move beyond that and link their issues to a "collective whole."

Lack of universality

- Our culture is dehumanizing, and accords little value to human life itself. Huge proportions of our population are simply treated as expendable. People are judged according to their productivity to generate profit for others. Our culture is about making money.
- The ideology of rugged individualism dominates our society. This leads to an isolation that produces self-centeredness and greed on the one side, and self-blame on the other, even for problems that are deeply embedded within society. As isolated individuals we are also quick to blame others, instead of collaborating with them.
- In our capitalist system, the drive for profit is placed above the needs of the people. Instead of pursuing what is good for society as a whole, the system is focused on generating profits for the few.

- Our needs are treated as commodities; and life itself has become a commodity. Items that are essential to human lives, such as medicines and homes, have been commodified and are thus restricted in access, instead of being treated as public goods. Rather than meeting needs, our economy is based on selling consumer goods by incentivizing consumer debt.
- The mainstream media is selling us propaganda and keeping us in a state of ignorance and fear. Our problems are swept under the rug; instead we are sold false dreams of ownership and consumption, along with suspicion of each other.
- Those in power use a divide and conquer strategy to prevent us from organized participation and joint action.
- The economy is globalized, yet our politics and culture is saturated with nationalism.

Lack of equity

- Power is highly concentrated in our society.
- People are being exploited by the capitalist economy, which produces poverty.
- A culture of dominance sustains racism, patriarchy and sexism, classism, and many other forms of discrimination.
- A culture of fear and division produces scapegoating and exclusion. Our communities' perspectives and contributions are not reflected in this national culture.
- The myth of "opportunity" takes the place of a focus on outcomes and a recognition of government's obligation to meet needs.
- Public policies are inequitable; spending and taxation decisions arbitrarily benefit some people but not others.
- Government programs are designed merely to appease the poor; there is no real plan to for equality or for eliminating poverty.
- Criminalization of the poor increasingly replaces the appeasement or charity model; private prisons, deportation and so-called public safety measures are controlling the poor.

Lack of accountability and participation

- Government serves the interest of profit-makers. The political process is driven by money and designed to maintain the current economic system. There is insufficient disclosure of corporate political contributions and corporate welfare.
- There is a lack of participation in government. The political process limits our input, which we cannot give on our own terms.
- Democratic processes are increasingly compromised or taken away through privatization. This removes decision-makers' public accountability.
- We suffer from a culture of fatalism and apathy. People feel hopeless and have internalized a top-down view of change and an expectation of the futility of their own actions. They no longer feel responsible to contribute, or they resort to a charity model of giving.

Our Analysis of Root Solutions

Northeastern participants used the human rights principles to structure their discussion of solutions to the problems underlying their various struggles. They envisioned a fundamental shift in the purpose of governance and economic structures toward prioritizing people and their needs. In a better society, any decision-making would have to be grounded in people's real lives. To achieve this, education and organizing would be needed to change people's consciousness, guided by values embodied in the human rights framework. The elements of a Northeastern vision for a new society are as follows:

Universality

- Our fundamental needs are met, including housing, health care, education, food, water, jobs, and transportation. Human rights provide a standard for measuring needs.
- The services and goods we require to meet our needs become public goods.
- We start with an assumption of abundance, not scarcity. We preserve natural abundance by exercising responsible stewardship of natural resources.
- Everyone receives a guaranteed basic income.
- Workers earn a livable wage.
- We foster a culture of collectivity and inclusion through our education system.

Equity

- We redistribute our resources and de-concentrate wealth.
- We set up forms of collective property (especially in housing, such as community land trusts).
- We tackle exploitation, possibly by eliminating the wage labor system. Wages are regulated to ensure equity among workers.
- Public spending and revenue policy (budgets) is based on people's needs (including progressive taxation and revenue raising measures).
- We foster a culture of support and solidarity, not scapegoating, through our education system.

Participation

- We define and assess our needs together, in our communities and based on our lived experiences, using human rights standards.
- We control public goods collectively, for example through participatory budgeting. We hold community assemblies and develop deliberative processes.
- We build collectivity as a force to challenge any concentration of power. We engage and organize our communities. We cooperate with each other and take collective action, learning from other movements, including those in Central and South America. We practice participation in our own organizations and communities.
- We create a political culture that people are willing to engage in. We make conflict a desirable force of democracy, instead of a nuisance to avoid.
- We create a system of human rights councils, based on a network of community councils.

- We conduct political education to build transformative leaders.
- We create our own education, media, and communications structures and content.

Accountability and transparency

- Our human rights are upheld and enforced.
- The institutions of government are restructured to ensure they correspond to government's new purpose of meeting people's needs.
- The people take a lead in creating measurements (qualitative and quantitative data, indicator systems) for meeting needs and fulfilling rights.
- Political representatives take their lead from people's participation. We restructure the political process and remove corporate money from campaigning and advocacy.
- We have strict public regulations for corporate profits to prevent a concentration of wealth. We require community oversight in corporate charters.

Northeastern participants emphasized the positive role that a broad vision for change could play in reaching out to more people and communities across the country. They summarized their vision in broad brushstrokes:

- A world without borders in which everyone can thrive.
- Everyone is valued the same, regardless of their occupation, age, race, gender, or any other factors.
- People respect and celebrate each other, and everyone supports and cares for another.
- A world in which everyone has easy access to everything they need – and more than that, a world in which beautiful and luxurious things are for everyone.
- A world in which meeting people's needs does not compromise the needs of future generations, because everyone cares about the survival of humanity.
- A world in which everyone will be empowered and has the time to enjoy life!

First Episode: Voices from Austin, Texas (January 2012)

The Texas Human Rights Dialogue was held on January 27 -29 in Austin, Texas, with 20 grassroots groups. A total of 38 participants and observers took part in the weekend's discussions. The Texas Host Committee consisted of the Austin Immigrant Rights Coalition (AIRC), the Border Network for Human Rights (BNHR), the Dallas Peace Center (DPC), Paso del Norte Civil Rights Project, and the Reform Immigration for Texas Alliance (RITA).

The Texas Host Committee began the Dialogue by sharing its perspective on the movement building goals and strategy that are part of the Human Rights at Home Campaign (HuRAH).

Our Goals

This dialogue, followed by the conventions across Texas, will help shape the process of building a human rights movement in the United States. This movement will be grounded in the historic struggles of communities in this country and driven by our shared vision of a new society in which the human rights of all people and communities in the United States are realized. We will build this movement from the bottom up by linking the many different struggles that are already flourishing in different localities across the country. The diversity of our communities will be embedded in this new human rights movement.

We seek to achieve structural change in our society – change that cuts across issues and addressed the underlying causes of the human rights crisis in the United States. All too often our struggles are short term and focused on a single issue. We have had breakthroughs on some issues in some localities, but we have not been able to achieve accountability for human rights in this country. We now come together to identify the structural causes of the many problems our communities face and to develop a shared vision for a new society and, ultimately, an agenda for policy change.

Basic human rights principles provide the guidance for developing this vision and agenda; these are the same values that have guided past struggles and that are evoked by communities across the world.

Human rights were born in the struggles of people and communities. Yet there is also a long history of movements plagued by divisions along lines of race, class and gender, imposed by the dominant culture. We will stand united and build a movement grounded in a commitment to the universality and indivisibility of human rights.

We, the people, represent the majority of our country, so it is in our hands to change it. To do this, we need to build the power of the people. This process has started in Texas, a state in which the conditions for realizing our rights are particularly harsh. We should be inspired and encouraged precisely because of this challenge; if we can do it in Texas, we can do it anywhere. All of us must realize that no matter how successful we are at the local or state level, we will only achieve real progress if we are able to connect our struggles to a national movement that has the power to effect structural change in our country as a whole.

Our Strategy

Our strategy for building a human rights movement entails three crucial elements:

- Organizing: grassroots groups involved in HuRAH engage and organize communities and build leadership
- Structural analysis: grassroots groups and communities recognize that their issues are connected to something larger than themselves, that the struggle is not just about their issue but about society as a whole
- Human rights: human rights encompass a wide range of approaches, including those focused on racial and social justice or on civil rights. Human rights help us envision an agenda that cuts across different issues and that allows us to meet the human needs and rights of all people and communities in the United States. This movement will be guided by the human rights principles of universality, equity, and participation, along with an understanding that public goods play an important role in implementing human rights.

Our Analysis of Root Causes

Austin Dialogue participants discussed the structural causes of their communities' problems by looking at the economic, political and cultural spheres of society. The causes they identified illustrate the denial of basic human rights standards.

Lack of Universality

- Our society's resources follow profit, not need. In other words, essential goods and services have been commercialized and privatized in the pursuit of private gains; they are not shared as public goods to meet human needs. This also means that our needs have been commodified, that is we have to buy our health care or housing as consumers in the marketplace.
- Much of the public sphere has become more private and commercial, it is no longer owned by the public.
- Our society is competitive rather than cooperative; the capitalist market economy requires us to be in constant competition with each other. Individualism rules, the focus is on "I, not us." Those who are dominant and hold power have imposed on us a division into different groups competing and even fighting each other. This division and demonization of people is most obvious along lines of race, ethnicity and religion.
- There is a prevailing belief in the superiority of the United States, which allows the dominant culture to justify wars and to dehumanize and denounce anyone who questions this.

Lack of Equity

- From the very beginning of the United States, the social contract in practice was based on exclusion, inequality and benefits to the few, and the purpose of government has not changed since.

- Our culture is characterized by a false but deeply held assumption of equal opportunity, which leads to justifying the distribution of resources based on private gain: if you're poor, you just didn't work hard enough.
- Wealth, resources and power are highly concentrated, due to the way capitalism works.
- We have a culture of charity that masks root problems and teaches us that there are band-aid solutions for meeting human needs without addressing the causes of suffering.
- We have a culture of dehumanization that allows us to justify racial profiling and mass incarceration.

Lack of Participation and Accountability

- There is a clear link between wealth and access to, or influence over, governmental processes. Those with wealth can control policy agendas, elections and government.
- There is a lack of accountability within the political process and a lack of participation by impacted people and communities.
- Institutions are not transparent and not accessible to communities.
- Our system of representation emphasizes voting rather than continuous political participation. Even within this narrow electoral model, problems abound, e.g. the campaign financing system is corrupted.
- We have a political ideology of individualism and personal responsibility, which also precludes participation in public matters and political processes. Many communities are marginalized, for example by a non-inclusive culture and educational system, which only recognize and reflect the contributions of the privileged.

Our Analysis of Root Solutions

Grounded in this analysis of root causes, Austin participants then created a vision of a society which addresses these causes and develops solutions that end the human rights crisis. Participants described the characteristics of a society in which human rights are realized, guided by the principles of universality, equity, participation and accountability.

Universality

- Our human rights must be formally recognized and government must ensure that rights are realized for all people and communities.
- Our resources should be distributed according to our needs and be publicly managed under community control. Governments at all levels must recognize that meeting our needs is an obligation and that they have to facilitate the meeting of needs through financing and providing public goods. The satisfaction of needs must not be for profit; we must create mechanisms that ensure that resources follow our needs and rights.
- There must be formal methods, developed with communities, for identifying fundamental human needs that carry obligations grounded in human rights. These must include a redefinition of the meaning of economic success. We need new economic indicators that assess how well

policies and economic development meet human needs and rights, not how well they generate growth or profit.

- We need a culture that promotes the common good over commercialism and consumerism.
- Our country must show global solidarity, so that we no longer sacrifice people in other countries for profit-making interests at home. We should also guarantee full mobility and at least minimize the harm caused by borders.

Equity

- We must democratize wealth and property ownership, which is currently highly concentrated.
- Some property has to be held publicly or collectively, as a public or common good, in order to ensure that it is used to meet human needs and rights.
- We need an equitable revenue system with more progressive taxation to finance the satisfaction of human needs, to close the gap between wealth and poverty, and to equalize incomes.
- Workers must have more power at the workplace and their rights must be fully protected. We need living wages for all, reduce the income gap, collective bargaining in all workplaces, and workers' decision-making about the use of profit. We have to re-envision the role of workers and wage labor, because the current system is based on workers' exploitation.

Participation and Accountability

- We must foster collectivity and inclusiveness. We need affirming spaces to build our movement, learn new values and patterns of collectivity, and assess the needs in our communities. We need to develop and implement inclusive curricula in our formal education system that tell our stories.
- Government has to be by the people; the people, in their communities, have to control and manage our resources collectively as public goods, not for private gain.
- Our political system needs more participation and less representation. Government needs to facilitate community participation in decision making; government policies and representatives' actions must be accountable to community needs.
- Our political system must be fully transparent. Any representative elements in our system, i.e. those related to elections and the actions of office holders, must be open to scrutiny by the people.

Our commitment to building a human rights movement

The Austin Dialogue concluded with a general commitment (subject to internal approval within each organization) by all attending groups to help create a state-wide Human Rights Council of Communities through forming local human rights councils.