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Contesting the neoliberal global agenda: lessons from activists

Maureen Wilson, Avery Calhoun and Elizabeth Whitmore

With the ongoing failure of governments to protect their citizens from impacts of the neoliberal global agenda, civil society groups worldwide have moved into the breach. Social workers, as allies of these groups, are uniquely positioned to help maximise their effectiveness in confronting the threats of corporate globalisation to democracy, economic justice, the environment and protection of the commons.

How do activist groups know when they're making a difference? This chapter builds on a four-year collaboration with nine diverse activist groups to see what we could learn together about effective practice in social/environmental justice work. We report on what activists told us about what 'success' means in their work, and what facilitates those successes. Reflecting on the implications of these findings in relation to social work skills and capacities, we suggest how social work educators might enhance our capabilities to contribute to the critical work of challenging and replacing the global neoliberal project.

> Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work . . . Every social worker has the opportunity to matter and, hopefully, the capacity to do so.
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> Gayle Gilchrist James, Past President, International Federation of Social Workers

The continuing global hegemony of neoliberalism presents a special challenge to social work. By virtue of our ethical obligation to address issues of social justice, social work is inevitably at odds with the neoliberal agenda and its exacerbation of social inequalities and environmental degradation.

National governments, generally speaking, have been spectacularly ineffective in either challenging the neoliberal global agenda or in protecting their citizens from its impacts. This failure – whether for reasons of ideological complicity with the forces of neoliberalism, or of constraints imposed by international financial institutions or trade agreements – has led civil society groups worldwide to move into the breach. Social workers are active with many of these organisations and movements, and they and those with

whom they work are increasingly looking for means of maximising their impact in transforming policies and practices detrimental to human welfare.

Yet in spite of the growing importance of the role of civil society organisations in protecting human and environmental welfare, there is a dearth of tools to assist citizens and the social practitioners who accompany them in assessing the effectiveness of different strategies in achieving successful outcomes. In this chapter, we hope to help inform the efforts of social work educators in developing the capacities of social workers to both carry out and evaluate social change practice.

The study

The impetus for the study discussed here was in two ethical obligations of social workers – to address issues of social justice, and to evaluate the effectiveness of our practice as we do this – and in our underdeveloped understanding of 'what works' in this area of practice.[1]

In this four-year project we collaborated with nine activist groups across Canada to see what we could learn together about effective practice in social/environmental justice work. Our objectives were to develop a better understanding of the meanings of 'success' for activist groups, to learn about factors and conditions that contribute to those successes, and to support our collaborating groups in reflecting on these questions in relation to their own work. Following a brief discussion of challenges to neoliberal hegemony among which we locate this project, we will share what we have learned that might support the efforts of social workers in their pursuit of social and environmental justice.

Neoliberalism and its discontents: consequences, critiques, challenges

Neoliberalism, a marriage of 18th century liberal ideas on individual liberties and freedoms and modern-day market fundamentalism, found impetus in the 1970s in the context of the inflation and falling rates of profit affecting economic elites. Its ideas on free markets, free trade and a non-interventionist state have found expression in structural adjustment programs involving cuts in government spending, privatisation of public enterprises, removal of controls on trade and exchange, deregulation of wages and prices, weakening of environmental protections, and in general the removal of any laws or regulations interfering with commercial interests. The neoliberal view, advanced by transnational corporations and their allies, and sectors hegemonised by these, is that labour markets need to be more 'flexible,' and social programs cut, to deal with international competition. Thus, neoliberals advocate cuts in unemployment insurance, repeal of labour protective laws ('labour market deregulation'), weakening of union power, and cuts to social programs. As economist Raj Patel puts it, 'from the 1970s onward, our economy was hijacked by free-market fundamentalists whose mantra was "greed is good, regulation is bad" ' (2009b).

Perhaps the most contentious tenet of neoliberal ideology is the principle that the rules of the market should govern societies, rather than the other way around. This belief in the

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inherent wisdom of the market[2] is combined with the assumption that competition will get things done in the most efficient ways possible, allowing the talents of the most able to find expression and eventually benefitting everyone: the rising tide of capitalism will lift all boats.

Some boats, however, prove more seaworthy than others. It follows naturally with the application of this doctrine – promoting competition between individuals, businesses and nations – that there will be winners and losers. Globalisation, operating under neoliberal rules, is producing a small number of fortunate winners and an overwhelming world majority who are excluded from its benefits (WB 2013; Yalnizyan 2013). Notwithstanding claims of free trade advocates that the majority will inevitably benefit from global economic integration, fulfilment of the promised broad improvements to human welfare resulting from deregulation and global competition has been little in evidence. Rather, the disparities that have grown over past decades between rich and poor – within and between countries – persist (Anand, Segal & Stiglitz 2009; Rosling 2013; Slater 2013).

Noting the extent to which this over-reliance on market forces and economic liberalisation has worked to the detriment of the world's poor, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, in its 2010 *Report on the world social situation*, pleaded for a shift away from the market fundamentalist thinking, policies and practices of recent decades. It urged national governments to implement sustainable development and equity-oriented policies appropriate to their own national conditions. This plea, however, has fallen largely on unresponsive ears, as have other similar reports and exhortations. For poor nations, the tying of their loans to structural adjustment requirements has meant that this shift in policies was not an option. The leadership of most rich nations, on the other hand, has largely bought into the 'common sense' of growth/trickle-down economics and the neoliberal axiom of 'bad state/good market' (McMichael 2010, 3).

Further, to many, 'free' trade agreements represent threats to democracy and to national sovereignty, as they constrain governments to act in accordance with commercial considerations at the expense of the interests of their own citizens or the environment. Trade agreements giving corporations the power to sue governments, should laws or regulations interfere with commerce, it is argued, result in the concentration of economic and political power in the hands of corporate élites. This expansion of 'rights' and 'freedoms' for corporations, with the dismantling of trade and investment barriers, has disempowered people and governments and transferred power into the hands of global corporations (Korten 1996, 2009; Trew 2013).[3] Thus, free trade agreements that allow the interests of corporations to trump those of governments, and the structural adjustment policies associated with globalism, have the effect of reducing the capacity – and right – of governments to protect their citizens from these impacts (Klein 2008; Cazes & Verick 2013).

Equally seriously, the growing economic and political power of businesses and investors in recent decades (Stanford 2008) has produced a mounting concern that inequali-

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2   Resonating with Polanyi's (1944) historical research demonstrating national markets are not 'natural' but created and maintained by an infrastructure of laws and institutions, Kozul-Wright & Rayment (2004) note, 'It is a dangerous delusion to think of the global economy as some sort of "natural" system with a logic of its own: It is . . . the outcome of a complex interplay of economic and political relations' (3–4).
3   Yet, as Korten commented, 'even CEOs are extremely limited by imperatives of global competition from acting socially responsibly. When they do, they are quickly replaced. When they do not, they are rewarded greatly' (IFG 1996, 12).

ties in wealth and power are fuelling the global climate crisis (Klein 2013; Nikiforuk 2008; Worth 2009b). Climate change, in turn, disproportionately affects the poorest of the poor through flooding, malaria, malnutrition, diarrhoea, rising world food prices, and the increasing numbers of 'natural' disasters (*New Internationalist* 2009; IPCC 2013). Thus, there is an additional sense in which 'the rich world owes the poor world an ecological debt' (Worth 2009a, 8).

The globalised opposition to the hegemony of neoliberalism is perhaps best summed up in the 'one no, many yeses' theme of the World Social Forum (WSF). Meeting in various places around the world as a counterpoint to the annual World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, the WSF represents a broad-based civil society rejection of the neoliberal global agenda (the 'no') and an affirmation of the multiplicity of alternatives that are generated through the creative genius of ordinary people (the 'yeses'). In the context of the shrinking role of governments, popular and civil society groups globally have stepped in to respond to the consequences of neoliberal rule – working at social and political levels, and also at the level of economic survival (Wilson & Whitmore 2000). Challenges to neoliberal globalism have come also from within corporate and political elites, as 'cracks in the Washington consensus.'[4]

How can citizen organisations make the most of their scarce resources as they work to strengthen civil society and broad democratic participation in impacting policies and practices detrimental to human and environmental welfare? And how can social workers contribute to these efforts? This is work of critical importance, yet while a wide range of civil society organisations has engaged in addressing these themes, remarkably little has been done by way of monitoring the effectiveness of these civil society interventions. There are daunting methodological and practical challenges in doing this, not the least of which is what has been described as a 'positivist resurgence' in the academy, particularly pronounced in the practice professions (Brown & Strega 2005). To the extent that this positivist perspective – with its illusion of neutrality – predominates, issues of how knowledge is socially constructed, and whose interests it serves, are obscured.

Evaluating activism

The challenges notwithstanding, the need of activists to understand whether and how their efforts are making a difference has increasingly engendered efforts to assist in this work.[5] While no consensus has emerged on any 'best' approach to assessing the effectiveness of activist work, two limitations are widely recognised in academic and professional literatures and in the 'grey literature' of activist organisations and funding agencies. First, the voices of activists themselves tend to be missing; the use of narrative has been suggested as a way of bringing these in while '[letting] the story be told' (Egbert & Hoechstetter 2007; Innovation Network 2008). Also missing has been the identification of outcomes beyond

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4   By the turn of the 21st century, as economic, social, environmental and political crises proliferated throughout the world, increasing numbers of people at the 'centre' questioned the neoliberal 'miracle' (Soros 1998). The Tobin Tax, Nobel Prize–winning economist James Tobin's (1978) proposal for a punitive tax on short-run speculative financial transactions, was one initiative proposed to rein in out-of-control capital. The 2008 market collapse created overnight neo-Keynesians in corporate circles, with recognition of the need for re-regulation in the interest of capital accumulation (Martinez 2009).
5   See, for example, Chapman 2002; Coffman 2009a; Klugman 2010; Masers 2009; Pyrch 1998; Reisman, Gienapp & Stachowiak 2007; Stephens 2009; Young and Everitt 2004.

specific policy change (Coffman 2007; Guthrie et al. 2005; Miller 1994; Miller 2004). This project attempts to respond to these gaps.

Methodology

In our view, social inquiry and practice are both at their best when grounded in praxis, 'developed out of a dialogue between activism and reflection – practice and theory' (Carroll 2006, 234). This combines the unmasking of the intersecting workings of capitalism, sexism, racism, ableism, heterosexism and other sources of marginalisation and exploitation[6] with action to bring about social transformation. In the study described here, we sought to serve as allies of activist groups in the construction of knowledge for practice.

While working alongside counter-hegemonic civil society groups and with a critical perspective, we used tools of appreciative inquiry (AI), the origins of which are in the very different discourse of management/organisational development. Unlike Grant and Humphries (2006), we find no contradiction in this. Rather than assuming methods are automatically linked with particular ideologies or interpretive paradigms, we consider any method to be potentially useful to the extent to which it can contribute to emancipatory ends.

As an action research method, AI builds knowledge through continuous/iterative processes of inquiry and change. It makes use of narrative to draw out success stories, to identify key elements for success, and to build on these. The narrative, or story, is evoked initially by using appreciatively phrased questions (see below) that guide the conversation. Although there are several variations, the process of AI generally includes four phases: discovery (from stories about high points, discovering strengths and potentials in the organisation), dreaming (creating a vision of a desired future), design (choosing what to work on now) and destiny (implementing the design).[7] The appreciative process, by engaging people in storytelling, captures nuances, emotions and energy that could be missed by other data collection strategies.(Bushe 2011; Cooperrider, Whitney and Stavros 2008). Further, as Patton notes, '[there is] evidence that some problems and weaknesses can be easier to surface when evaluation takes an appreciative stance' (2003, 91).[8]

Recruitment of collaborating groups

We recruited groups to work with us in this project not for representativeness, but for diversity and potential theoretical payoff. We issued invitations through several networks asking for activist groups interested in exploring with us the question 'how do you know when you're making a difference?' From the responses and by reaching out through our own networks, we deliberately selected groups that varied in terms of focus of work, organ-

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6   This requires the courage and intellectual honesty to carry out 'a ruthless criticism of everything existing, ruthless in two senses: the criticism must not be afraid of its own conclusions, nor of conflict with the powers that be' (Marx 1978, 13).

7   The 'dream' phase of this process addresses the criticism that AI 'ignores the negative'. In the dream phase, people are asked to envision a positive future, implicitly providing information about what they see as deficits in a current reality.

8   See also Bushe 2011; Dick 2006; Elliot 1999; Cooperrider 2008; Fals Borda 1986; Patton 2010; Reason & Bradbury 2007, 2008; Whitney & Stavros 2008; Zandee & Cooperrider 2008.

isational size and complexity, demographics, support base, funding, and geography. These included:

- a grassroots group of older women with no staff, budget or organisational structure
- a national environmental research/advocacy organisation with a large professional staff
- a gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender youth group
- the national chapter of an international development advocacy organisation
- a Quebec-based social justice advocacy group focusing on international issues
- a high profile self-advocacy group of disabled activists
- a rural/Aboriginal-based group affirming remote and rural life
- the Canadian chapter of an international body advocating for the rights of children
- a provincial organisation of professional social workers addressing social justice issues.

The process

Our approach with each of the nine groups varied depending on the needs and capacities of both the group and the research team. Generally, the process began with an introductory workshop for the group followed by in-depth individual interviews of group members, with appreciative framing of the questions.

The individual interviews were semi-structured, allowing for interviewer–participant probing and dialogue. The interview guide included questions such as the following:

- Can you tell us about a successful project/campaign/social action you have experienced in your work? [Probe: What were the things that helped to make that successful?]
- What are you most proud of about your group/organisation?
- When is this group at its best? [Probe: Can you tell us about a time like that?]
- Can you talk about a time when your group/organisation successfully overcame an obstacle or challenge? [Probe: What made that possible?]
- Imagine that you fall asleep for five years. When you wake up, what would you hope to see in your group/organisation? [Probe: What does it look like? How is it working?]

Eighty-six in-depth interviews were carried out with individual activists, with a range of 5–15 interviews per organisation. Following the transcription of the interviews for a particular group, a preliminary thematic analysis of the interviews formed the basis for a second workshop, co-facilitated by the researchers, to assist the group in clarifying its 'dreams' and moving to the creation of shared vision, action and reflection. Additional workshops were available to follow up on this work, to allow groups to make further use of what we had learned. Assuming that most groups would have time and financial constraints, we built in funding for each to hire a research assistant to manage logistics and serve as liaison with us.

We held a two-day symposium to discuss the preliminary results, offer space for representatives from each collaborating group/organisation to talk about their experiences and learning, and to refine our understandings of the meanings and facilitating factors for success. The symposium also provided an opportunity for participants to network with each other. The discussions were animated, with exchanges of insights, good energy and lots of laughter as we grappled with ideas about success and how to put it all together. An appreciative spirit infused these conversations, as participants focused attention on what works and why.

Making sense of what activists told us

Analysis of the individual interviews involved a continuous process of coding and categorising the data using the constant comparison method. At least two researchers coded each interview. As interviews were completed and the project progressed, we developed successively more finely tuned categories. At the broadest level, our codes reflected the two main research questions: what does success mean to social/environmental justice activists, and what do activists think contributes to their success? Within each of these two main codes, multiple categories, subcategories, and sometimes sub-subcategories, emerged as we tried to honour both the differences and the similarities in the stories our participants were telling us.

Activists' perspectives on success

What did activists convey to us about the range of meanings, for them, of success or effectiveness in their work, and about factors that facilitate success? Not surprisingly, there was considerable overlap between the two – an achievement that was a step along the way to an ultimately desired outcome was often, in the moment, experienced as a success in itself. In the following, we highlight themes emerging in this study that are of particular relevance to social work's pursuit of social justice in the context of the dominance of the neoliberal agenda.

What does success mean?

For the activists participating in this study, success or effectiveness in their work has a number of interrelated meanings. While sharing a desire for transformational change – for broad social, political, economic and environmental justice – they described to us a rich range of other specific indicators to them that their work has been successful. These included themes of concrete changes in policies, practices or laws; citizen engagement; aspects of the functioning of the activist groups themselves; the raising of awareness or changing of attitudes of politicians, decision-makers and the general public; and personal change for activist group members themselves.

Broad transformational change

Activists from all groups in this project described success as achieving social/environmental justice: 'Well, you know, success comes when people who are poor and oppressed are no longer poor and oppressed'. People told us of envisioning a time when 'the world is at peace and we have a handle on all of the environmental problems'. Some described 'the total elimination of racism, the total elimination of sexism and homophobia', and others 'no poverty in the world for children. All children are going to school. No child is dying of HIV/AIDS'.

Changes in specific policies, practices or laws

While keeping goals of broad social/environmental transformation always in mind, activists told us they assess success in terms of specific 'concrete' outcomes – changes in

policies, practices or laws in their own spheres of activity. For example, 'Canada did cancel the debts . . . Yeah, it was a major success', or 'Finally we got [the accelerated capital cost allowance] removed from the federal budget in 2007. And by doing so, we put back in the pockets of Canadians . . . hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue'. Success was celebrated when laws were enacted: 'to have inclusion of sexual orientation [in the Individual Rights Protection Act]' and policies changed: 'McMaster and Guelph adopted a fair trade policy'. Having roles in framing decision-making processes and constructing debates were often described as victories: 'The fact that there was a public review process for us was a victory in that we had been calling for that to happen. And there were certainly certain elements of how the panel undertook its work that reflected our recommendations'.

Citizen engagement

Democratic participation or citizen engagement was widely identified by activists as an end in itself. The numbers of people engaged was identified as an important outcome especially in relation to public gatherings such as rallies or demonstrations and for letter-writing campaigns or signatures on petitions. The engagement of people from a broad range of social sectors was also seen as a positive indicator: 'Marching down that street, that feeling in Calgary, with such a wide range of middle class people and people with children . . . soccer mums'. The diversity of people engaged in social justice activities is widely valued: 'There will be First Nation kids, white kids, older people, all together. To me, I think that's just the most amazing part'. Many groups see it as important that people engaging in social action are not just 'the usual suspects', the ubiquitous hard core activists.

The nature or quality of people's engagement is sometimes even more celebrated than the numbers or identities of the people engaged. Valued are nonviolence, civility, risk-taking, collaboration, self-advocacy and, to some most importantly, just the fact that people are standing up and making themselves heard.

Engaging people of opposing views in civil public dialogue is considered a particularly important aspect of success by many activists:

> So four of them came together and then they had a conference . . . And to me, something like that is especially good, because it brings people together, and people from different perspectives. Even though they don't agree with each other, but this is a place where they can exchange ideas, you know. And trying to understand better . . . Just the fact that we could bring people together to talk about the issue, to me, it's a success.

The act of speaking out, or making one's voice heard, is often defined as an important achievement in itself. For example, for a disability action group, advocating for one's own and others' rights, publicly voicing one's opinion is highly valued:

> I feel proud when we do our Louder and Prouder Rallies every year. Because we're able to come out and show, 'Yes, we have a disability and we're not shy to show that we have one, that we can be loud, like loud and proud about it.

The presence of energy and enthusiasm was widely identified as indicative of engagement and an important sign that things are going well: 'People investing their energy is always a measure or a sign of success. And people just being enthusiastic' and 'when we were at

the activity . . . the atmosphere, the enthusiasm, the pride, just the participation was overwhelming.'

Changing attitudes or atmosphere around an issue

Shifting attitudes or atmosphere surrounding an issue is often considered mainly a means to an end. However, for specific pieces of work, attitude change in itself is seen as a sign of the success. For example, for members of the disability action group, reframing the meaning of disability was described as having hugely empowering implications both for their self-esteem and for their approach to activism.

> I really appreciate those opportunities where you make someone question. They ask . . . 'Why are you . . . celebrating disability?', 'Why are you calling [your campaign] Freak Out?' Like, 'That's so wrong, you shouldn't be proud'. And then someone with disability goes, 'But I am and what's wrong with that?' [A certain group member] has been confronted a few times by people who are TABs (temporarily able bodied, he calls them). And he just . . . challenges people.

Shifting attitudes and/or raising awareness among specific target groups was identified as important to all groups in this study. Politicians (or their constituents) and decision-makers, for example, are frequently singled out for attention: 'we visited targeted [Members of Parliament] across the country and we made sure to get to MPs of all different stripes. And our ask was that they would take this campaign to the respective caucuses'. Attracting media coverage and bringing awareness to the general public were also often mentioned as evidence of success: 'We could see every night on the news . . . if we were successful, if we got media attention and our particular voice was heard. And it quite often was'. The importance of enhanced public awareness is evident in this statement: 'Fifteen years ago, if you were to ask someone, 'What is a sweatshop?' [the answer would have been] 'I don't know'. Whereas now, if you ask people 'What is a sweat shop?' there is a fairly good idea about what a sweatshop is'.[9]

Personal experience, meaning, learning

The struggle for social justice can be difficult and discouraging work. Change can be slow – at times, barely perceptible. Sometimes activists have a feeling of 'tilting at windmills, because we're trying to take on big issues'. People in this study told us they are heartened in their desire to 'do the right thing' when a 'concrete' objective has been met. 'There is a good feeling when you help make something happen, like a Starbucks recognising Ethiopia's rights to their own brand names for coffee'.

Many activists are motivated by a feeling of 'being part of something that's bigger than yourself'. '[When] you can see sort of a global movement – people taking action and that you're a part of that.' Others speak of a sense of belonging. One participant summed up what many felt about his organisation: 'one of the things this place offers . . . is a sense of community'. For groups in which membership is based on personal identification with the

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9   A workplace typically involving long hours, poor pay, unsafe conditions, flouting of labour/child protective laws.

cause they are working on, success is to some extent defined by feelings of acceptance and validation of identity.

> I think it was successful for me because through the course of being together, sharing stories, talking about issues, talking about systemic barriers . . . we came to realise a lot of what we share, and also the gathering was not just about the discussion of problems . . . We all left feeling a tremendous surge of pride in who we are and in what we do.

Sometimes that personal validation and acceptance morphs into a politicised involvement in the struggle for social justice, in a shift of focus from the personal to the political: 'The Youth Project slowly built me up as a stronger individual, of being a LGBT youth and all of a sudden, the following year, I became . . . this big youth advocate for gay and lesbian students in my school'.

Also widely mentioned by participants in this study was the importance of having fun. In an echo of Emma Goldman's (1931) 'If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution', one youth observed that 'There's a lot of laughter, there's a lot of fun involved . . . So the process itself is kind of as rewarding, I find, as the result . . . And that's definitely one of the motivators of being here . . . it's important work, but it's also fun.'[10]

Facilitating factors

We were impressed by how clearly they highlighted the importance of the ability to identify, analyse and act strategically in relation to the environments in which they are operating. Conversations about relationships between broader social structures, local contexts, and individual experience were among the most passionate, perhaps because the commitment to positive change derives in large part from activists' profound understanding of the structural causes of social inequities. Many participants expressed the view that the world could really change if only all of us were to understand that 'everything is connected'.

Because structural analysis – understanding the broad social forces and opposing social/economic interests determining social structures – is considered foundational to achieving social justice goals, many groups develop strategies designed to help themselves and their constituencies (policymakers, politicians, their own members, the general public) to understand these connections. Some identify this process as 'consciousness raising' or 'connecting the personal and political'. A stakeholder described how effectively one advocacy organisation made these connections:

> They [workers in the advocacy organisation] deal with social implications, they deal with economic implications, they deal with ecological implications, and they're very good at getting people to understand that all of these things are integrated.

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10   Attributed to Emma Goldman based on a passage in her Living My Life: 'I did not believe that a Cause which stood for a beautiful ideal, for anarchism, for release and freedom from convention and prejudice, should demand the denial of life and joy' (1931, 56).

In addition to the need for this structural analysis as a foundation for their work, activists also emphasised the critical importance of conjunctural analysis. That is to say, they pointed out the importance of examining the moment (conjuncture) in which they are operating – and of understanding how current forces, actors, and events represent constraints or opportunities for action in a given moment. Sometimes, it is a matter of taking advantage of an unexpected opportunity: 'there was a new Minister . . . who was looking for something to hang her hat on and we got her at the right time'. Sometimes considerable study and preparation is required:

> I mean, first off, you have to actually analyse [the situation]. You have to step back and analyse who holds power. And which players directly influence decision-makers who hold power. And the second thing you have to do is understand what buttons they have to push . . . what are the interests the power holders have . . . so that you're in a position to change their thinking by pressing the buttons.

Other facilitating factors for success participants mentioned included their organisations' credibility or reputation, various aspects of the internal functioning of their groups, their ability to attract, engage and retain participants, and a range of additional specific strategies they have found to be effective. These included clear focus, careful planning and preparation, mobilisation of support around an issue, judicious use of strengths/resources/talents within the group, creativity in strategies/activities/approaches, and persistence/tenacity.

Evaluation: attribution vs contribution

In relation to 'concrete' changes particularly, attribution was frequently identified as an issue, especially by groups accountable to funders. Where many forces, conditions and players are involved, it is difficult to credit a success to any particular group:

> When we define success . . . it is changing government policy. Changing bad policy into good policy. Now the problem with that is there's always an attribution question, so we can play a role in that, but there are so many other roles . . . You could have a really progressive Prime Minister, you could have huge public concern, and again, environmental groups can play a role in that, but they're only [a] part . . . You could have a spate of news media stories . . . a huge number of factors that go into a political decision.

Many participants identified pitfalls related to characterising only these observable or measurable types of outcomes as successes. In one way or another, achieving a change means 'a long, slow process' of which they may never see the full results. Others worry that too much reliance on 'measureable' outcomes might 'force people to choose, as advocacy targets, quantifiable things that aren't necessarily systemic change'.

Conclusions

Challenging neoliberalism

What does all of this tell us about how social workers can best respond to the global and local challenges of neoliberalism? Clearly social work values have much in common with the goals and aspirations of the activist groups with whom we've collaborated. And it can be argued that some of the most promising countervailing forces to neoliberal hegemony, both in practice and in the development of accompanying theory, tend to come from those rooted in popular struggles. Thus, it is not surprising that social workers all over the world are already allied with the popular movements they hope will help to build a more equitable and sustainable world. However, how we work in relation to these processes is more complex than simply deciding whose 'side' we're on.

The findings of the study discussed here illuminate some of the ways in which activists, in large and small ways, are working to respond to injustices in the context of a neoliberal world. Without doubt, their aims are about 'changing the world'. But they have told us that the large or small social and personal changes that happen along the way are not separate from, but an integral part of, those goals. We have heard them talk about the importance of both structural and conjunctural analysis, of the linking of the personal and the political, and of the compelling sense of being a part of something larger than oneself as they engage in this work.

We were struck by the yearning evident in the words of many of the activists for an alternative to the unrelentingly individualistic, competitive ethos associated with the ascendancy of neoliberalism. And as they spoke about their coming together to work for change, we could not help but be inspired by the energy, excitement and profound commitment that were communicated along with their words. The untapped power of this yearning can represent an important asset as individuals, groups, networks and alliances come together as formidable adversaries of the existing order – collectively, 'the other superpower'. Max Neef (1997) likened this to the power of a 'cloud of mosquitoes' which 'hangs together but has no chief'. No one caught in that cloud doubts its effectiveness.

Implications for social work and social work education

We opened this chapter with a quotation from the late Professor Gayle Gilchrist James (2003), asserting the importance for social workers of the opportunity and the capacity to work for human rights and social justice. It is with building this capacity that social work education must concern itself.

Social workers can bring a range of roles and skills to this work. As noted by participants in the study discussed here, what are needed are skills for both conceptualising this reality, and for effective means of acting to change it – though not necessarily in that order. Most of these needed skills are already present in social work, which owes a debt to both Gramsci (1976) and Freire (1973) for their explication (Whitmore, Wilson & Calhoun 2011). As Susan George (1997) has pointed out to us, the Gramscian recognition of the importance of the struggle for ideological hegemony – the 'war of ideas' – in recent decades seems to have been taken more to heart by the champions of neoliberal economic doctrine than it has by more progressive forces. This work needs to be reclaimed by those united in the search for social and environmental justice.

It is perhaps also time to revisit another Gramscian notion: the leadership potential in 'organic intellectuals' who contribute not by virtue of holding the social role of an intellectual, but by virtue of their intimate connection to, and reflections on, the struggles of daily life (Gramsci 1976). This lesson, developed by Freire (1973) to dramatic effect in popular education (education for critical consciousness) with Latin-American and African underclasses, has come to significantly impact how social work is conceived (Alayón 2005; Wilson & Prado Hernández 2012).

Along with their value orientation (Wilson 2012), social workers can bring important conceptual and practical skills to work both on the terrain of the 'war of ideas' and on the terrains of political and economic action. These include the ability to analyse the historical contexts in which we work, as well as the ability to distinguish, carry out and share the skills of both structural and conjunctural analysis. This must include knowledge of the nature of neoliberalism (the rules of engagement), of its current manifestations, of its human and environmental consequences, and of current government and civil society responses to these impacts. It implies the ability to work with others to analyse historical moments and their possibilities, and to use and share these insights in relation to the intersection of personal troubles and public issues, as well as in practice directly addressing structural issues.

With these, as Professor James reminded us, social workers are uniquely equipped to make ourselves effective allies as we work for and with activist groups, organisations and movements addressing issues of human rights and social justice. More conscious and systematic attention to the development of the conceptual and practical skills needed in this area of practice, and to the range of participatory and collaborative research approaches available to support it, will enhance the capacity of social workers to contribute in this way. Since there will never be a road map for this kind of work, the thoughtful application of these skills becomes critical as we 'make the road by walking'. (Horton & Freire 1990).

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