Using Action Research And Appreciative Inquiry To Explore Effectiveness In Social Justice And Environmental Advocacy Work

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How do you know that you are effective or successful in the social justice advocacy work that you do? The answer to this question is best expressed by our project participants:

“Canada did cancel the (Honduras, after Hurricane Mitch) debts. ...Yeah, it was a major success.”

“People investing their energy is always a measure or a sign of success.

“Fifteen years ago, if you were to ask someone, ‘What is a sweat shop?’ [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 sweat shop is.”

“I think there’s a lot of successes that take place, like you work well together, you meet timelines, you see a turnaround, people are happy at the end of the day.”

“I think the spin-offs that took place from this (event) are more important things that I would say constitute success. First of all, in each one of the settings, the number of networks that were built amongst the academic institutions, the students themselves, and the community groups that came to these lectures, were absolutely phenomenal.”

“[Success is] ... taking the time to invest in the people ... when they’re pulling in different segments of the community – you know pulling in the Aboriginal members, as well as the non-Aboriginal members – and helping to facilitate relationships amongst these members.”

About the project

This case focuses on understanding what makes a difference, about “what works” from the perspectives of social justice and environmental activists themselves. Through workshops, interviews and a national symposium, we asked participants to tell us what success or effectiveness means to them, and what they think are some of the factors or conditions that contribute to their successes.

Our case is not about a formal evaluation but of evaluative practice in a broader sense, through a research project with two purposes. One purpose was to try to support, in a very practical way, the work of progressive activists by creating an additional space in which to step back and reflect on (in effect, evaluate) what they are doing and the impacts of their efforts – whether and how they were making a difference. In the often frantic world of activists, such reflection becomes a luxury. A second purpose was to add to our collective understanding about what success means in terms of activists’ efforts to achieve broad social justice and environmental goals.
We worked with nine very diverse groups and organizations across Canada over a 4 year period (2005-2009):
1. Raging Grannies: A grassroots group of older women with no staff, no budget and no organizational structure
2. Pembina Foundation: A national environmental research/advocacy organization with a large professional staff
3. Youth Project: A gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender youth group
4. The national chapter of an international development advocacy organization
5. Social Justice Committee: A Quebec-based social justice advocacy group focusing on international issues
6. Disability Action Hall: A high profile self-advocacy group of disabled activists
7. Storytellers' Foundation An Aboriginal group promoting education and local development in rural British Colombia.
8. Anonymous: A national chapter of an international organization advocating for the rights of children
9. Alberta College of Social Workers: A provincial organization that regulates social workers and addresses social justice issues

**Methodology**

**Assumptions about knowledge development:** The project’s methods were grounded in social constructionism, which emphasizes that knowledge derives from social interaction and reality is dynamic and indeterminate. Equally important, not only is knowledge contextually determined, its creation, in turn, influences. That is, from the constructionist perspective, how we interact is generative of reality. From the variety of methods that are in keeping with constructionism, we chose two—action research and appreciative inquiry— that are consistent with our philosophical position, social justice values and specific research questions.

**Action research:** Action research (AR) paved the way for our partners to be genuine collaborators in the research and in the evaluation of their own practice. The core aspects of AR—collaboration and dialogue among partners, and the focus on practical applications—offered a solid foundation for our work.

**Appreciative Inquiry:** Appreciative inquiry (AI) helped focus our participants’ reflections on what was already working within their organizations and on preferred future outcomes. AI essentially shifts the focus from problem-oriented thinking to a process that examines and builds on positive experiences and successes in planning for, designing and implementing future actions. This process informs both our understanding of a situation (theory) and what we do about it (practice).

Using tools of action research and appreciative inquiry, our process involved a series of workshops with each organization, a set of in-depth individual interviews with a variety of stakeholders (92 interviews) and a symposium that brought representatives from our partners together to share their experiences and refine our collective understanding what success means in social justice and environmental work.

**Values and quality**

A number of basic values and premises guided this research. One premise was the need for civil society interventions in a neo-liberal world. With the diminished ability (or willingness) of governments to protect their citizens from its impacts, civil society organizations worldwide have been moving into the breach, confronting the threats of corporate
globalization to democracy, economic justice, the environment and protection of the commons. An important value stemmed from the imperative for social workers to address social justice issues and to evaluate their practice, as part of the professional code of ethics. Sharing power constituted an additional key principle or value. As allies with the participating organizations, we were very aware of the need to be flexible and adapt the methods to the needs of our activist partners. Above all, participation in this project needed to be useful for them, while also responding to our interest in knowledge creation.

We used a number of strategies, drawn from various sources, to enhance the quality of the process: Guba and Lincoln ‘s (1989) strategies to increase the trustworthiness of results, including prolonged engagement and persistent observation, member checking, triangulation and peer debriefing; their authenticity criteria (fairness, inclusiveness and action)( Lincoln, and Guba 2000); and Mertens’ (2005) emphasis on standpoint, attention to voice, critical reflexivity, and reciprocity.

Our partners welcomed the opportunity to reflect in some depth on their work; indeed that is why they wanted to participate in the project. The process pushed them to articulate what they did, their criteria for success, and the evidence that their efforts were effective. The dialogic process integrated the sharing, feedback and critical analysis so essential for enhancing quality. Some found this helpful in strengthening funding applications, others for planning and evaluation purposes.

**Complexity**

Our study is grounded in the day-to-day realities of a highly varied set of organizations/groups. Ramalingam and Jones (2008: 63-64) call this a pragmatic perspective, that is, we focused on the relevance of complexity to assess practical benefits for activists doing social justice and environmental work. Our deliberately flexible process was built in from the beginning, as we were well aware that each organization’s needs and interests would be different.

All of the key concepts of complexity theory were reflected in individual stories and interviews and in our collective discussions. People could tell us, in vivid and detailed narratives or stories, about successful campaigns or events, but had difficulty putting these into simple cause-effect terms. They understood the interconnectedness of their work, illustrated in the ubiquitous presence of networks, coalitions and collaborations among organizations. They were well aware that unpredictability was part of the process, and that learning and adapting were ongoing. In spite of that, they felt strongly that their work did, in some way, contribute to the changes they wanted to make. It seemed to us that activists were often most excited, and felt most creative when they were operating "on the edge of chaos."

The meaning of success cannot be reduced to a singular, easy to define, sound-bite; its value is precisely in its complexity, its dynamism, its many meanings. Our challenge or, rather, opportunity, is to embrace this ambiguity, and harness the energy, commitment and enthusiasm of activists and their organizations (the attractors) that support progressive change.

The surest safeguard for rigour, according to Chambers (1997), is sharing with peers and inviting their analysis and critical review. These processes constituted the essence of our method. The negotiation process (initially and throughout) allowed for what Guijt (2008) calls ‘messy partnerships’ to be adjusted as circumstances and needs shifted. We built in
flexibility, so that each organization could use the process in a way that best suited their interests. The symposium brought people together not only to share and network, but more importantly to critically examine and refine our results. Finally, eight organizations have contributed chapters about their experience to a book about the project, to be published next year. All these processes served to strengthen the robustness of the project and our results.

References


