SOCIAL JUSTICE

Social Justice: for radical community development social justice aims to create worth, equal rights, opportunities for all and the elimination of inequalities reinforced by poverty. (Commission for Social Justice, 1994)

Social Justice and Inequality...

Equality or rather inequality is a hot topic these days. Increasingly we are hearing about the gap between the richest and the poorest in our society and the negative impact that this has on society as a whole. *'Almost everything from life expectancy to mental illness, violence to illiteracy is affected not by how wealthy a society is but how equal it is.'* (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009)

The evidence is very clear, plentiful and to the large part uncontested. Inequalities do exist and societies with a bigger gap between rich and poor are bad for everyone in them including the well off. Just like we have accepted (in theory of course) that health is impacted by a broad number of factors know as the social determinants of health, it is what we do with this knowledge that matters. How do we bring about transformative change; in our policies, our actions, our society?

'The true measure of a nation's standing is how well it attends to it's children their health and safety, their material security, their education and their sense of being loved, valued and included in the families and societies into which they are born' (UNICEF 2007).

One of my earliest school memories is protesting to a teacher in the playground 'that's not fair', the teacher replied, 'life's not fair'. 30 years later I fully understand the significance of her reply. She was right life is not fair, people suffer injustices every day. However, she was wrong to silence my protest and challenge of injustice.

It is bad enough to live in a society where children go to bed hungry, wake up hungry and going to school without breakfast but it is more dangerous and damaging that we come to accept this as normal and feel powerless to change. We are increasingly seeing those living in poverty demonised, labelled as 'scroungers' and blamed for their circumstances. A message cascaded from politicians at the very top, reinforced through sensationalist media coverage and unfortunately seeping into the mainstream mindset distracting us all from identifying and addressing the real causes of inequality.
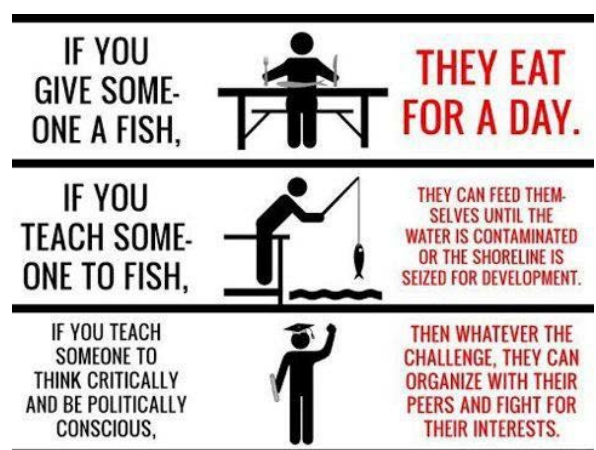
Social Justice and Participation...

Transformative change to a more just society cannot happen without the engagement of people and communities. 'People perceive that they are part of a greater unity, a more coherent whole, rather than alienated fragments without the power to change the issues that are affecting their lives'. (Ledwith, 2010) This builds social capital and through collective action people work together to bring about change.

Many people worked hard the last time a gilded age ended to reduce social inequalities and to secure more justice, so the 'impossible' has happened before. (Dorling, 2010)

... 'but at all stages , creating a more equal society involves people speaking their minds, making the case, organising and campaigning.' (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009)

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SOCIAL JUSTICE

Social Justice and Community Development…

Social Justice is one of the five values upon which community development is founded. *'The practice of a more just society starts in the personal every day experiences that shape peoples lives'*.

Community development is about people questioning their reality and working together to bringing about change. *'Collective action grows in strength as individuals form groups, groups identify issues and develop projects, and projects form alliances that have the potential to become social movements.'* (Ledwith, 2010)

To make changes that are truly transformative we must ensure that our practice identifies and tackles the root causes of inequality and oppression. Ledwith reminds us *that failure to do this means that our practice 'floats on the surface dealing only with the symptoms of injustice'*.

Social justice and health inequalities…

'Inequalities in health arise because of inequalities in society in the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age.' *'Health inequalities that are preventable by reasonable means are unfair. Putting them right is a matter of social justice. A debate about how to close the health gap has to be about what sort of society people want.'* (Fair Society: Healthy Lives, 2009)

The Marmot Review illustrates that not only does disadvantage start before birth but it continues to accumulate throughout life and so action to reduce inequalities must start before birth and be followed through the life of the child. These actions must also address the social determinants of health, they must identifying and tackle the root causes of ill health.

'So close is the link between particular social and economic features of society and the distribution of health among the population, that the magnitude of health inequalities is a good marker of progress toward creating a fairer society.' (Fair Society: Healthy Lives, 2009)

Health inequalities in Northern Ireland

People in NI living in poverty have…

- 23% higher rates of emergency admission to hospital
- 66% higher rates of respiratory mortality
- 65% higher rates of lung cancer
- 73% higher rates of suicide Double the number of self harm admissions
- 50% higher rates of smoking related deaths
- 120% higher rates of alcohol related deaths

(2009 Inequalities Monitoring Report, DHSSPS)

CDHN believe community development approaches are an effective way of tackling health inequalities because those who subscribe to this model generally view health as being largely determined by prevailing social, economic and environmental factors. As a result they tend to focus their energy on working towards social change and more equitable power relations between different groups rather than focusing solely on individual behavioural change.

'It's a curious logic that would define a woman's problem as being that she smokes when she lives in damp, overcrowded accommodation on a low income and is depressed, single and expecting twins to a man married to someone else.' (Spencer et al, 1989)

What is needed to achieve social justice?

According to the New Economics Foundation (NEF) the 3 economies—people, planets and markets need to work together.

They believe the central purpose of the welfare system is to harness and distribute the resources of the 'three economies' in order to enable all people to live their lives in ways that are satisfying and sustainable. They say a new settlement between social, environmental and economic

interests, is required to reshape the process of policy making across the three spheres.

NEF's 6 steps towards sustainable social justice…

1) **Aim for well-being for all** - as the primary objective of sustainable social justice.

2) **Put prevention before cure** - failure to prevent avoidable needs arising is unsustainable, unethical and unjust.

3) **Grow the core economy** - utilise the abundant wealth of human and social resources that are largely neglected by today's welfare system.

4) **Make carbon work for social justice** - eg concerted public investment in 'green collar jobs' can help unemployed people get into work.

5) **Make public services sustainable** - lead by example.

6) **Value what matters** - Current patterns of short term, cost driven decision making – so called 'efficiencies' – must give way to more broadly based investments that aim for longer term social and environmental returns.

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