



Chapter 10 »

The majority are socially excluded!!

Marginalised groups and the challenge for civil society

‘The worst sin toward our fellow creatures is not to hate them, but to be indifferent to them: that’s the essence of inhumanity.’

George Bernard Shaw, *The Devil’s Disciple* (1901)

In the previous chapter we concentrated on youth as the hope for the future. However, the diverse groups who make up our society, and their capacity for contributing towards social progress, notwithstanding the discrimination they experience, must not be forgotten. Today we measure the progress of human society largely on the economic achievements of those who are already relatively privileged. In the coming decades, humanity has to learn how to judge itself on the progress of those who are most socially excluded. For democracy to have any value, policy-makers and civil society organisations must address the issue of justice for socially excluded marginalised groups.

Firstly, let us define ‘socially excluded marginalised groups’ for our purposes here. There are majority groups that have also been marginalised historically and still are today. These include young people, already discussed in the last chapter, and women, addressed throughout the volume. Therefore, the socially marginalised groups we will be looking at in this chapter include indigenous communities, people living with HIV and AIDS, people living with disabilities, people living with illness, religious/cultural/linguistic minorities and people with an alternative sexual orientations. In particular we shall look at the complex issue of older people. Collectively, the numbers of these disparate groups are enormous and constantly on the increase.

The world is suffering from various large-scale unsolved health catastrophes, such as the silent genocide of AIDS in Africa and elsewhere in the world. This has vast repercussions, since the numbers of sufferers are growing, and have been every year since statistics began in 1990. Similarly, the numerous hot spots of societal and political violence around the world mean that increasing numbers of people are living with the after-effects of violence – disabilities of all kinds abound as the result of war, conflict and the after-effects of war such

as land mines. The World Health Organization estimates that 750 million people in the world are living with disabilities, 80 per cent of whom are in developing countries. In these poorer countries, only 2-3 per cent of children with disabilities go to school. This means the cycle of poverty can never change for the vast majority of the one-in-ten children born with disabilities.

Social exclusion is also driven by invisible prevailing prejudices against the indigenous peoples of the world. If citizen organisations are to stand for justice, they need to recognise that some of the greatest crimes of genocide in human history have been perpetrated against indigenous communities. While it might be impossible to reverse these injustices and for example, return *all* the land that was taken from indigenous communities historically, it is imperative that we do more to protect and celebrate the culture of indigenous peoples, which history will judge as being much more attuned to how human beings need to live in order to co-exist harmoniously with the environment. Their way of life is in stark contrast to those who set out to 'civilise' such communities and in so doing initiated a process of greed, accumulation and conquest which has brought this planet to its current precarious point.

So how do these different areas of social struggle intersect? This is the critical question. It is a fact that people in richer countries with a proper healthcare infrastructure can live with HIV for a much longer time than those in poor countries, a clear example of the way in which poverty exacerbates the challenge of illness. The only way forward for all concerned is to find moments and points of intersection between the various struggles that are, on the whole, being conducted independently of one another. Below, we take a look at the various groups identified as forming part of a marginalised consensus, and examine ways in which they might be able to identify and act on these moments of intersection.

Older people

'In Africa, it is said that when an old man dies, a library disappears. Without the knowledge and wisdom of the old, the young would never know where they come from or where they belong. But in order for the old to have a shared language with the young, they must have the opportunity to continue learning throughout life.'

*Kofi Annan, former United Nations secretary general
and member of the Elders*

Who are older people?

The definition of ‘older people’ varies in different cultures. The differences tend to be around what ‘older’ means within the chronology of age. Some classify people as ‘older’ when they cease being able to do things for themselves. The UN definition of ‘older’ is 60 years of age or above. Some countries define ‘older’ according to a legislated pension age. However, whilst definitions are necessary, they can also get in the way of defining justice for older people. For example ‘younger’ older people in Africa still have enormous responsibility in the raising of grandchildren whose parents are working, whereas in the global North, grandparenting is often a leisure activity, undertaken part time or sporadically. However we define ‘older’, the reality is that the societal status of this ‘group’ is changing. Whereas, traditionally, older people were respected and revered for their wisdom, they are now becoming marginalised as their numbers grow across the world.

An ageing population



As more countries develop better education and better healthcare infrastructure, people live longer.

The global population of older people is projected to double by 2050 to 21 per cent of the total population. The increase will be greatest and most rapid in developing countries where the older population is expected to quadruple during the next 50 years, while the proportion of children is projected to drop by a third, from 30 to 21 per cent. The reality is that life expectancy is increasing all over the world, and in virtually every country (except those in Southern Africa, due to HIV and AIDS). According to the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2005 population statistics, 80 per cent of the global population of over 60s will be living in the developing world by 2050. In 2005, over 60s accounted for 10.4 per cent of the global population (673 million). In other words, older people are becoming an increasingly large group in both sheer numbers and in terms of proportion of the population.

Clearly, it's not just in the global North that populations are ageing. In fact, 11 per cent of China's population today is over 60. As more countries develop better education and better healthcare infrastructure, people live longer. Significant differences also exist between developed and developing countries in terms of the kinds of households in which older persons live. In developing countries a large proportion of older persons live in multigenerational households. Older women outnumber older men increasingly as age increases, though this is currently more the case in developed countries than developing countries. Recognising the differential impact of ageing on women and men, and that more older women than men will be left living

on their own with very little visible means of income, is integral to ensuring the development of effective and efficient measures for all older people.

Despite the huge demographic changes that are taking place, there is little discussion about the consequences of the success of keeping people alive for longer, nor about the role of older people and how they should be regarded within the new global society. Consequently, older people frequently experience the discrimination, invisibility and neglect familiar to other minority or marginalised groups.

Older people are citizens, contributors and consumers in the world, like everyone else. They are people with hopes and fears who continue to have a place in society. And like everyone else in society they need and want to be heard, valued and respected. They are not just people who are dependent, frail, and grateful for whatever bit of help or charity they can get, whether that help comes from the state, their community or their family.

The promotion of the full participation of older people is an essential element for a healthy and dynamic society in which the combination of the experience of the old and the freshness of youth are recognised as being of value. Strengthening solidarity among generations and intergenerational partnerships can provide a strong momentum for change driven by civil society. Maggie Kuhn's US-based Gray Panther movement of the mid-late 20th century, whose motto was 'Age and youth in action' offered a shining example of the generations campaigning alongside one another on common political issues.

Older people and civil society

Society on the whole is failing to adequately reflect either the significance or the value of older people. This position is not helped by organisations focused on the specific needs of older people, who often isolate themselves from the mainstream of civil society, 'specialising' both their remit and their voices. The contributions of older people are not taken nearly seriously enough in mainstream or issue-based civil society organisations. Just as young people are viewed as 'half full', older people are too often viewed as past their expiry date.

We are failing on a global scale to see the potential of older people – a big mistake given their numbers and the contribution they could be making. Older people have technical skills and knowledge. They also have experience and first-hand knowledge of history (which can be either a negative or a positive attribute, depending on how this



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knowledge is used). Older people need help in order to overcome the digital divide, something which is widening to a far greater degree in the global North than the South, creating a growing chasm between young and old.

In developing countries where the welfare state is likely to be non-existent or minimal, the burden falls on working populations who are often unable to meet their own immediate needs, much less the needs of an extended family. This is not a marginal issue; it is a mainstream issue that must be addressed by a cross-section of societal entities simultaneously.

Today policy-makers look at older people in terms of the cost/benefit equation. Those not contributing to GDP are viewed as a cost to the system. In fact, this model is simplistic. Ways of attributing economic value to viable roles performed by older people, for example childcare, need to be found.

Furthermore, with the growing numbers of older people it is essential to integrate the evolving process of global ageing within the larger process of development. In 2002 the Second World Summit on Ageing was held in Madrid, Spain. The International Plan of Action on Ageing which emerged from this summit calls for changes in attitudes, policies and practices at all levels in all sectors so that the enormous potential of older people in the 21st century may be fulfilled.

The aim of the Plan of Action is to ensure that older people everywhere are able to age with security and dignity and to continue to participate in their societies as citizens with full rights. It proposes 'ageing-mainstreaming' and 'ageing-specific' as the main policy directions for achieving this. Ageing-mainstreaming aims, in the same way that gender mainstreaming does, to integrate or mainstream ageing issues into all major national policy domains, such as development planning, finance, housing, education, income generation and health. The second type of action includes policies and programmes that specifically address the needs of older people, such as old age pensions, long-term care and healthcare services. An important component of both types of policy action is capacity-building for both organisations working with older people and for organisations of older people. This is a central role in which civil society organisations could play a part, by recognising and supporting the role and place of older people in their communities.

However, it is not only policy-makers who fail to value older people's contributions. Many civil society and non-governmental organisations, who should know better than others that people have rights, still choose to ignore both the plight of older people and the contribution they can make, even within their own realms of influence. For example, women's organisations the world over are increasingly strong and vibrant, yet much more needs to be done by these organisations to address the rights and potential of older women specifically. It could also be argued that older people themselves aren't doing enough to advance their own cause. The focus of many organisations in the older people's movement is on supporting the specific needs of the older generation and delivery of services to meet those needs, and insufficient attention is paid to the policy changes that are needed. Considerably less energy is given to wider activities that may increase the role, the voice and the value of older people across the spectrum of contemporary issues that affect us all. In the end, older people themselves are losing out – as individuals, who are not realising their full spectrum of rights, and at the same time receiving inadequate pensions and healthcare; and as a collective force, who are not realising their potential to effect change within their wider communities.

What do older people want?

We all live in a world of multiple identities. These include class, religion, geography, socio-economic grouping and also age. Whilst younger people and young adults tend to align themselves more closely with these diverse aspects of identity, there is a perception that older people are more inclined to view themselves in terms of their age band, rather than any other group. But the lives of older people are a combination of all their life experiences, which in turn are influenced by religion, location, income and so on. It is this life course that affects how they are and what they do today. Older people are not a homogeneous group with the same views on things or the same needs. Many studies bear out that two of the things older people want most for themselves are to have meaningful relationships and to make a useful contribution to society. This shouldn't be that hard to fulfil, given certain practical allowances. Older people often have more control over their time and are therefore an incredibly valuable resource who could be engaged in strengthening grassroots activities at the local level. In many instances this kind of mobilisation may require resourcing and support in practical ways, such as transport and so on, but it is a massive social asset that is not being tapped.

Society's failure to value older people within its cost/benefit criteria has moral implications. Older people have usually contributed to so-



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ciety and their local economy for decades and deserve some kind of acknowledgement. If they're lucky, they might get a state pension or state-sponsored healthcare. But what other rewards are we affording this growing band of people on a moral level? Do they not, at the very least, deserve some measure of status and respect for the contributions they have already made? Indigenous cultures look upon their older people with deference for their wisdom and experience. The rest of us could take note.

Creating an older people's movement

The older people's movement can take some positive learning from the youth movement. Youth mobilises as a form of recreation. They add enjoyment to the act of gathering, they advocate hard for inclusion in decision-making processes and work hard to be included as a sub-set that is increasingly institutionalised in mainstream civil society movements. Youth are moving stealthily beyond their silo, commenting on and influencing issues well beyond delivery to the specific needs of young people. In a similar fashion, older people have the tools, the numbers and the vested interest to broaden their approach, while simultaneously advancing their cause.

It is not as though older people are fundamentally underrepresented in societal institutions. In fact, one could argue that they are overrepresented in politics, in business leadership and other spheres of influence. What remains is for active older people in influential positions to recognise their obligation to those with less opportunity to have a voice. Those who possess influence can help to advance the cause of older people significantly, by aligning themselves with the call for increased social capital to be afforded to older people as a whole. Importantly, though, we must underscore the potential for older people to advance other causes too, not just the needs of their own group, since they have so much to contribute to broader efforts to create a more just world.

People living with illness and disabilities

People living with illness

We often think that it is predominantly the elderly who suffer from illness within our society. However, there are millions of people of all ages living with curable and incurable illnesses around the world. The tendency is for society to view these people, living with lupus or sickle cell disease or multiple sclerosis or cancer, among other diseases, as a problem, as people who need to be managed until death, rather than as people with a great deal to offer society.

People living with illnesses require the status of citizens with full rights of participatory citizenship. Of course they need specialised help from a health perspective, but the strategies to advance their cause lie in exploring the opportunities for coordination of the various groups that support these different illnesses. I believe there is scope for greater unity, coordination and interaction between some of these specialised groups.

Even in a country like Germany, with a strong movement of patient rights, there is a tendency for the different specialised fields to operate in relative isolation from one another. If there was a greater effort to build unity, find common ground, while recognising difference and divergence, it could potentially give a stronger voice and policy impact for all the different constituencies. This should not preclude investment in looking at how these groups can support each other, whether this means accessing state funding for cancer research or for other terminal illnesses, or securing an enabling policy framework. Imagine how much more powerful it might be if someone suffering from a condition that was not that being lobbied for was speaking alongside somebody with lupus, who was speaking alongside advocates for resources for cancer research, for example. By working together and moving away from specialised fields of operation, greater opportunities can start to arise.

People living with disabilities

Society needs to take collective responsibility for its failure to value the potential contribution that people living with disabilities have to make. Of course people living with disabilities need support, and this will vary with the nature of the disability. But even in those parts of the world where support is available for those with disabilities, we fail to provide adequate opportunities for disabled individuals to contribute to society and public life. The British MP and former government minister, David Blunkett, has done much to help the cause of blind people by simply getting himself to the position he did – and then being judged by voters and colleagues against the same standards applied to sighted people. We must advocate for more people living with disabilities to be included in public life, particularly in countries where conflict has resulted in disabilities for so many, such as Afghanistan, Iraq or the US where so many returning soldiers have come back with serious disabilities.

More than this, though, we must look closely at the policy deficits at the national and global level. By this I mean we must take a long, hard look at how government policies and practices are enabling people

living with disabilities to contribute to all facets of life in the workplace, schools, public office and so on. A complete paradigm shift is needed in order to take minority discourse to a wider, broader social level. Public perceptions must be changed to facilitate this paradigm shift. If we focus only on what groups with disabilities do not have, rather than their capabilities, this in itself is disempowering. Often the well-intentioned fundraising activities supporting delivery programmes for disabled people fall into the trap of using shock or sympathy to generate support. In the long run, these advertising programmes can do more harm than good. The institutionalisation of disabilities often prevents people from enjoying normal activities in which they are capable of participating. Here again silos are a big problem. We must ask ourselves the questions: How are the voices of these groups heard in everyday life? How do people living with disabilities integrate into other social and citizen constructs?

People living with HIV and AIDS

When we talk about people living with HIV and AIDS we need to recognise that this is now a global pandemic with tens of millions affected, and one that disproportionately affects people in poorer countries around the world. In Africa alone we lose 6,000 people every single day as a result of HIV and AIDS. Many who are not dying of full-blown AIDS are dying from what is euphemistically called opportunistic infections, linked to being HIV-positive, when people's immune systems can be so eroded that a severe flu can be fatal.



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The issue of HIV and AIDS raises the troubling question of the struggle against racism. If, for example, in Western Europe and North America 6,000 died each day as a result of HIV and AIDS, the global community and particularly the dominant nations within the global community would not just be talking about the need to intervene with a significant scale of resources, there would be real action. I am saying this as an African. Richard Curtis, key in the formation of Make Poverty History, has said that you can bet your last dollar that if that number of people were perishing from preventable illnesses and death in the Western world the resources would long ago have been found. This raises the question that if we live in a world where some people are seen as expendable, why isn't there a bridge between those movements fighting racism, those seeking to tackle HIV and AIDS, and organisations such as the Pan-African Treatment Action Campaign which advocates for the necessary resources and support for people living with HIV and AIDS (PLWHA).

Acknowledging the vast scale of the epidemic, we also need to think about how it is addressed. A point worth noting is that if someone other than those closest to the pandemic speaks out about HIV and AIDS this can result in the severity of the crisis being taken more seriously. This is not to be insensitive to the fact that people want to speak for themselves. People living with HIV or AIDS legitimately want to have the biggest say in the advocacy for their interests, but this does not mean their voice is undermined by having people struggling with other illness stand shoulder to shoulder with them in advocacy campaigns for better HIV and AIDS policies.

One of the key reasons that it is important to look at how different areas of social endeavour intersect, is that we know that middle-class or relatively well-off people who are HIV-positive, especially those from wealthy countries where there is a better health system in place, succeed in managing and living with the HIV virus for a much longer period of time. We need to look at how poverty, and a whole range of issues, exacerbate the challenge of addressing the HIV and AIDS pandemic. Consequently, it's critically important that we focus on where the different struggles intersect. This is demonstrated by the Global Call to Action against Poverty, where addressing HIV and AIDS is seen as a fundamental part of addressing the overall global struggle against poverty. If there is inadequate health care, poor sanitation, limited access to water or nourishing food, the struggle of people living with HIV and AIDS is intensified to an almost immeasurable degree.

Other marginalised groups

People with an alternative sexual orientation

The gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual and intersex (GLBTI) communities have been perceived to represent a challenge to mainstream sexual and societal norms. As a result this community has been marginalised throughout modern history, and it is only recently that it has mobilised itself to participate as a growing force within civil society.

Nevertheless, many GLBT people in many parts of the world are still living in secrecy. In many countries homoerotic activities are criminalised and GLBTI people face violent persecution by the state and by others. Even in the so-called liberal democracies where formal equality exists before the law, GLBTI young people are far more likely to commit suicide, and far more likely to be victims of unprovoked violent attacks, while many face bullying or outright discrimination in the workplace. The interaction with dynamics of race, class and gender also tends to compound existing inequalities. These are

fundamental human rights concerns, and it is important that those in the GLBTI communities are given the opportunity to make their voice and contribution heard in the ongoing discussion of the role and nature of human rights within civil society.

In addition, the struggle of campaigners on HIV and AIDS issues is connected with the question of social attitudes towards the gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans-gender community. While it is clear that many people affected by the pandemic are heterosexual, it's undeniable that the GLBTI community has paid a huge price as a result of the pandemic, as well as placing itself at the forefront of the campaigning around HIV and AIDS. However, the question remains as to how we get the different struggles to intersect as effectively as possible, so that the different connected agendas can all move in a positive direction. The gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender communities need to continue to participate in the struggle alongside the movements fighting racism in Europe. Together they could seek a way to build a bridge with the Pan-African Treatment Action Campaign.

My argument is essentially that investing more time, energy and resources in alliance-building and joint advocacy across these different silos is an investment well worth making, because this will ultimately enhance all the different agendas. People often speak about unity and coordination, but it takes hard work to build alliances across different areas of interest and across different institutional, organisational and territorial boundaries.

Indigenous peoples



One of the areas where media invisibility manifests itself most powerfully is with regard to the surviving indigenous peoples of the world.

Social exclusion is also driven by the invisibility that the media bestows on marginalised groups. One of the areas where invisibility manifests itself most powerfully is with regard to the surviving indigenous peoples of the world. If civil society is to stand for justice, for reversing historical crimes against humanity, and so on, we have to recognise that when human history is recorded, some of its most atrocious injustices, including genocide, have been meted out against the indigenous peoples of the Americas, Australia, New Zealand, parts of Europe and also Africa and Asia. For civic action not to take on board that historical fact weakens our morality and our legitimacy in fundamental ways.

If we had listened to the wisdom of various indigenous communities, we would not be confronted by the climate catastrophe we are now facing. If you look at the indigenous peoples of North and South America, for example, their relationship to their environment and the centrality of valuing the environment in all its shapes and forms

was something we have sadly and foolishly ignored. It is only now, in the early 21st century, that the world is having to return to the wisdom and knowledge of indigenous peoples, and recognise that in fact they hold the solutions in terms of sustainability, recycling and actually stewarding and caring for our planet. It is the indigenous peoples, who have been decimated through genocide in countries that today claim to be democracies, who possess the knowledge and wisdom that can save this planet from the over-industrialisation, damage and destruction we have inflicted on it. There is a Cree proverb which I quoted at the CIVICUS Vancouver World Assembly in 2001, an assembly technically held on sacred land of the first nations in Canada: 'Only when the last tree has died, the last river has been poisoned and the last fish has been caught, will we realize that we cannot eat money.' Time has not totally run out but is fast running out for us to reverse this dangerous trajectory that humanity has embarked on. Learning from the historical knowledge of indigenous peoples might very well be one of the solutions to the climate crisis.

We need to recognise the cultural dislocation caused by genocide. We also need to acknowledge the fact that these nations were conquered, and learn to value what is in danger of being lost, doing whatever is possible to recompense societies whose alienation from our modern world has driven their children into alcoholism and drug addiction. The elders in those communities are correctly trying to ensure that they hang on to the knowledge of their ancestors. Imagine how different the world would look today if the indigenous peoples of Australia, New Zealand, the US and Canada had developed a visa system and were 'civilised' enough to defend their territory, as a result of having access to the guns and weapons of the 'civilised' world. Of course, I say this a bit tongue in cheek, since one could very well argue that true 'civilisation' is not one that generates weaponry that kills fellow human beings and other forms of life on the planet. And needless to say, the word 'civilised' is probably one of the most abused and problematic words, given how it has been used over time.

While we cannot reverse the legacy of injustice and genocide, current generations must look at how to ensure respect for voice, presence, rights and resources of the remaining descendants of indigenous peoples, so that their culture is safeguarded in its own right, along with their decimated body of knowledge, so vitally important for our impoverished global society. There are challenges of resource provision. In the US they are dealing with resource realities by throwing casinos at native reservations, which breeds another whole set of social problems.



The indigenous peoples of the world possessed and still possess a spiritual dimension which, we might well come to realise, is more sophisticated than that of their conquerors.

In New Zealand/Aotearoa, and in North America, people still take part in spirit-dreams, just as the First Nations used to do. It's an experiential process and testament to the way in which the indigenous peoples of the world possessed and still possess a spiritual dimension which, we might well come to realise, is more sophisticated than that of their conquerors. They see God in nature and God's presence in the natural world on earth. This is in contrast to many of the world's organised religions, which promise people a better life after death in another space, rather than redeeming that better life in this space.

When I was 15 I was expelled from school for leading a protest march against the apartheid system during a national student uprising against apartheid education. It was 1981. Paddy Kearney, a white South African, who led an organisation called Diakonia, an ecumenical inter-denominational group which helped victims of apartheid and lobbied for justice, mobilised the faith community to support those of us who had been expelled. There was a mass meeting to mobilise public support to get us reinstated. At that stage, as a 15 year old, I was very much seeing the struggle in South Africa as black people against white people, so it was a revelation that this man, Paddy, would come and stand with us. The government in 1981 had just passed a law with high prison terms for anyone trying to burn the South African flag because 1981 was the 20th anniversary of South Africa becoming a republic. Paddy gave a speech where he asked what right the government had to pass this law, to punish people for burning the symbol of the state, when the symbol of God on earth is human beings. If these human beings were 'God's flags', he said, and since they were being violated so overwhelmingly by the apartheid government, the government had no right to be passing any laws about burning a piece of cloth with some colours on it. It was a powerful thing to say but got to the heart of the issue about what really matters when you measure symbols against the truth of humanity.

I think that when we see indigenous peoples solely as an example of a quaint historical throwback, we're failing to understand the current moment of history that we inhabit. This can be seen in the fact that in 2007, after decades of struggle, the indigenous peoples finally got the UN to create a declaration of the rights of indigenous peoples. Yet many of the dominant nations, including Canada and the US, have still not signed the UN convention because they are scared about the reparations they might have to pay. The failure to understand our common humanity is evident in the way it has taken so long even for formal apologies to the Aboriginal people to be made by the Australian government, which until recently persisted in a state of denial

with regard to its nation's history. Importantly, it was civil society expressions from the dominant white community in Australia that pushed for a government apology, in a campaign which went on for decades. It was a moving moment when the white Australian band, Midnight Oil, performed 'Beds are burning', a song that speaks of the atrocities committed against the Aboriginal people, at the Sydney Olympics in 2000, wearing black tracksuits with the word 'Sorry' emblazoned on them.

Dalit and Romany peoples

The Dalit caste in India and the Romany peoples scattered around the world represent two more examples of the many other marginalised communities that are struggling for recognition of their human rights, and who suffer from an absence of media and campaigning focus on their plight.

The caste system has been officially abolished in India, but still persists, and the Dalit community could continue to suffer for decades to come the injustices it has suffered for so long. The 1989 Protection of Atrocities Act was supposed to protect the Dalits; in practice, though, they are still frequently subjected to prejudice and discrimination, which sometimes takes violent forms.

The persecution of the Romany people has been an ongoing blight on Western culture for centuries, and continues to this day. For hundreds of years they have suffered from pogroms, forced assimilation and a denial of their cultural and human rights. Perhaps because of the geographical disparity of the Romany people, they lack formal political structures or representation, which means that it has always been hard to get their cause heard in decision-making institutions or the mainstream press, where they are frequently demonised.

The experiences of both the Dalit and the Romany peoples are examples of the way in which marginalised communities suffer as a result of the fractured approach towards addressing their issues. Campaigners from diverse marginalised communities need to find ways to connect with one another, recognising their commonalities. By working together, they will strengthen both their individual and their collective campaigns, and this can lead towards addressing centuries of injustice, and the eventual institution of effective and functioning human rights for marginalised peoples across the world.

Marginalised communities and alliance-building

A greater effort must be made by the various groups involved in representing different interests to build unity and create common ground. How can the various struggles intersect to enhance their collective ability to get all these progressive agendas moving forward? We need to look beyond our borders, look beyond our specific needs and invest time, energy and resources in breaking down the silos. Building alliances and crossing boundaries is hard work and requires new skills. But the investment is worth the returns.

Let's take HIV and AIDS as an example of one of the big issues. At the micro level there is a lot of work to be done to fight stigmatisation of people living with HIV and AIDS. The contribution of organisations not primarily focused on this issue is vital in advancing advocacy and highlighting this global crisis. We also need to ensure that those who are most vulnerable – the victims of multiple levels of exclusion because of poverty, poor health, lack of education, and so on – are provided with the resources they need, so that lives are saved and what I call the passive genocide, or daily silent tsunami, that is under way is reversed. In addition, we need to look at the appropriate enabling policies at the meso level, driven by political leadership.

In South Africa, the country with the largest number of PLWHA, policy has been marked by ambiguity and worse. Indeed, the record has been scandalous, with the government engaging in self-indulgent and esoteric policy debates around whether being HIV-positive leads to full-blown AIDS, and a questioning of the link between HIV and AIDS. We do not have the time or energy or luxury to go round in intellectual circles in this way. This issue needs to be addressed at the policy level by individuals who have the necessary influence to be listened to. It is also crucial that HIV and AIDS are tackled in the context of other crucial social justice issues.

Earlier, I referred to Zackie Achmat, founder of the Treatment Action Campaign in South Africa. Even though he has challenges with his own health, he does not simply focus on HIV. He is first and foremost an African citizen operating within the South African nation-state, speaking out on a wide range of social justice issues. His contribution has led to the TAC becoming one of the most powerful social movements in South Africa, one which has delivered enormous benefits to the struggle against HIV and AIDS. His example creates a model for the way in which marginalised communities can strengthen campaigns across the board if they can succeed in crossing issue-based boundaries to promote positive change.