Social Movements

Supporting and nurturing social change processes

What are social movements, and why are they important?

Social movements are joint efforts by citizens, groups and communities bound by similar goals who organize themselves to act and overcome their condition, tackle social issues together or resist domination. Social movements represent more intense and visible moments in a continuous social change process: the pace accelerates and the scale increases as the initial group generates more debates and rallies more people, in a snowball effect nurtured by activism, dialogue, networking, mobilization, media engagement and action.

Social movements are the core of social change. Famous historical efforts include the US civil rights movement, the women's suffrage movement, the anti-apartheid movement, gay rights and broader LGBTQ movements, decolonization movements, the Arab Spring, Black Lives Matter, Global Citizen and the MeToo movement. And beyond these global and national processes, subnational and local movements form and evolve constantly.

In the cooperation industry, Community Engagement is frequently conceived as a deliberate effort which originates from duty bearers. It often relates to specific initiatives put in place and led by development organizations and public governance bodies. Social movements, in contrast, emerge and grow organically from people's experiences and principles. They often start from shifts in belief systems, unnoticed until a tipping point is reached or an event triggers the movement. They are fundamentally grassroots and aim at systemic change, embodying self-determination, empowerment and people being agents of their own change.

The way our institutions react and respond to these forms of collective action affects their success. It is critical to understand these social phenomena and find ways to work alongside and nurture them, without misrepresenting or co-opting them. This is a thin line to walk. UNICEF, for example, needs to support spontaneous youth activism on climate change, as this movement is critical to creating an environment in which change becomes possible; but the process should remain youth-led.

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Social movements 101

Driving forces and voice

The underlying causes of social movements are often grievances linked to inequalities, injustice and power differentials. The mobilization aims to challenge institutions, systems or social rules.

At the heart of social movements is the idea of expression of those who are disenfranchised. Participation and engagement are ways for people to make their voices heard and bring their own positions in society and experience of life to the forefront of public debate.

Trigger and take-off

The driving forces might be at play for years, but there is often an event which precipitates the action and the change. The so-called Arab Spring started with a Tunisian street vendor who set himself on fire. #MeToo began with the revelations about Harvey Weinstein and Alyssa Milano popularizing the hashtag and subsequent movement. Rosa Parks helped initiate the civil rights movement when she refused a white man her seat on a bus. Shootings at Sharpeville were a turning point of the anti-apartheid movement.

To get off the ground, social movements also need a set of early actions to rally people, inspire and spread the vision (for example, see this report from the Nesta foundation on social movements for health). This includes effective messaging; early collective action; and leveraging initial leaders, members and resources to grow.

Leaders

Social movements can be driven by key actors, both existing figures (such as Mahatma Gandhi) and previously anonymous people who become influential (such as Greta Thunberg and Malala Yousafzai). They usually carry personal stories that connect them to the movement and rise to the moment, building on their actions, skills and capacity to persuade others to join. Their role can take several forms, and as identifiable members of the movements they often act as spokespeople, formulating meaning ('sense-making'), telling stories, articulating demands, representing, advocating and negotiating on behalf of many. This type of leadership usually emerges organically, given the voluntary, dynamic and self-governing nature of these efforts.

Networks and spill-over

Social networks are the architecture and the grid on which social movements are built. Action emerges in groups where people are interconnected and share similar characteristics, activities and world views. Information and engagement spread when these clusters manage to connect through a bridge to other clusters (communities, social groups, etc) where ties are also close. Through these mechanisms, the existing organized movements can drive mass mobilization and grow larger and stronger – the spill-over effect. Communication is at the core of this process (see this issue of the Journal of Communication dedicated to communicative dimensions of social movements).

The network of influences in and around social movements is complex and not limited to direct participants, often involving formal and informal relationships and interactions with institutions and various segments of society.

Social media

The nature of social movements has evolved as the proliferation of the Internet has provided the possibility to overcome gatekeepers and censorship from those controlling the traditional media and communication space. The Internet is used to both mobilize movement members and reach out to new activists. In recent years, movements in various countries (such as Iran's Green Movement) have used Facebook and Twitter to organize and disseminate information on protests, bypass state regulations and restrictions, coordinate meetings and petitions and even mobilize resources. Social media has also been used to bring international attention to local issues, such as repression and imprisonment of political opponents or journalists.

This capacity to communicate quickly with digital tools and overcome geographical and institutional boundaries can help social change efforts spread rapidly with less control from elites, creating online movements with higher spill-over potential. Technology also allows every equipped citizen to become an active creator of communication content, rather than simply a consumer.

Local versus global

These global and national examples help us quickly understand what social movements are, but similar social change processes are happening at neighbourhood, community and subnational levels all across the world. The people most affected by specific issues are gathering, organizing and acting for change; seeking to correct inequities in local governance and investments; working for gender and ethnic diversity among elected officials; halting the destruction of fragile

local habitats; seeking improvements in local schools, transit systems, housing and living conditions; seeking to reverse the local manifestations of discrimination; seeking higher healthcare provisions and standards; and so much more. These local efforts are essential to making progress towards local, national and global development goals.

Key principles

Social movements:

- **Emerge and grow organically from people** – their experiences and principles
- **Focus on challenging and changing the existing norms**, beliefs, institutions or systems that people perceive as working against their collective interests
- **Nurture**, coalesce and grow a diverse set of voices and experiences through dialogue and networking
- **Nurture**, coalesce and grow a diverse set of linked collective actions
- **Seek to create and expand a set of collective actions** focused on the social and policy changes that the people engaged in the movement regard as a priority

What is the role of development institutions?

Social movements are one of the many ways in which social change can happen. Zooming into downstream levels, the line between a local social movement and other community change processes gets blurry. In both cases, success relies on people being collective actors for the change they identify, agree on and want.

Social change is a long-term process, and development institutions can't create social movements. But we can work with partners to understand and nurture the movements that exist and to strengthen the role people themselves can and do play in the creation of a better society, to increase the potential for more endogenous action to emerge.

- Development organizations can nurture social change and social movements by strengthening community and civil society systems, empowering local stakeholders and building capacity to respond at local level to the needs of change: see these tools on community networks, capacity building of CSOs, accountability systems and the broader principles and tools of community engagement.

- Development organizations can also help expand the network of those who can join the movement, rallying more people and supporting coalitions towards the common goal. Additional voices, experiences, skills and supporters can enrich the effort and increase its potential. For help in engaging the right people, see the social mobilization tool.

- Institutions can also leverage a large set of strategies to create conspicuous and purposeful alignment between their actions and the objectives of social actors, while leaving the movement towards change to be activist-led. This includes opening spaces for dialogue and sparking public debate and conversations in order to place issues in the public domain for consideration and action, and eventually policy change. It also includes influencing the communication environment, marketing and entertainment industries so that they don't reinforce negative stereotypes and systems of domination. See the campaigning, partnering with media, partnering with the private sector and edutainment tools, as well as the public policy advocacy approach.

- Without stealing the spotlight from grassroots movements, organizations can support the crafting of engaging narratives and messages that speak to the interests and motivations of specific audiences, to create a sense of urgency and reach beyond the existing scope of a movement. See the storytelling tool for technical guidance.

Objectives

- Facilitate a process of engagement of citizens, communities and organizations in social change
- Facilitate conversation, dialogue and debate on key development issues, from the local to the national level
- Amplify the voices, analysis and ideas of those most affected
- Play a support and enhancement role for emerging social movements
- Help to build networks of people with shared concerns, including by connecting groups and clusters to increase collective power
- Offer accurate information on the development and rights issues in question
- Support policy and systems change

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When social movements are not the best approach

Even though supporting people in claiming their rights is a clear objective for development and humanitarian organizations like UNICEF, it remains fundamental to not endanger them. In many contexts across the world, activism can lead to dramatic and, at times, deadly repression. It is the duty of institutions like UNICEF to pursue the fulfilment of rights while ensuring the safety of people and communities. Organizations also need to ask themselves how much their support for certain social movements can reinforce lines of tension within society and across groups, bringing people closer to danger. The best way to anticipate and avoid these pitfalls is by investing in deep analysis, understanding and critical reflection around societies and their power dynamics.

The grassroots nature of a social movement doesn't make it positive by default. The White Power movement, the anti-vax movement, anti-gay movements across the world and the many efforts opposing migrants and other minorities share all the characteristics of social movements but go against the achievement of rights and pursuit of social justice. These can strongly test institutions, requiring them to clarify their position and take a stand.

Finally, even though the Internet and social media have enabled more movements to originate online, the absence of cooperation and collective action in real life or the lack of trusted leaders able to represent and negotiate on a group's behalf can mean that efforts hit a wall and dissolve without achieving tangible change.

Case studies and examples

KENYA Social Movements and SBCC: Tapping into the Strengths of Movements to End FGM: Donors, organizations, and activists in Kenya helped pass the Prohibition of FGM ActAnti FGM Act in 2011, which criminalized FGM and created an oversight and coordination board engaging and amplifying the voices of survivors of FGM in the anti FGM movement

UNITED STATES How ACT-UP changed America: A brief history of the HIV-AIDS grassroots mobilization and fight for rights and equal access to treatment for all in the US

GLOBAL Scaling social movements through social media: The case of Black Lives Matter

SPAIN Communication Activism as a School of Politics: Lessons from Spain's Indignados Movement: Ethnographic research examining some key communication activism practices

UNITED STATES No Fracking Way!: The role played by the documentary *Gasland* in rallying opposition to fracking

US The Social-Psychological Origins of the Montgomery Bus Boycott: Social Interaction and Humiliation in the Emergence of Social Movements: On triggering factors and causes behind movements and momentum

CHINA Wild Public Networks and Affective Movements in China: Environmental Activism, Social Media, and Protest in Maoming: Contemporary environmental protests in Maoming, China

GLOBAL Activist Strategic Communication for Social Change: A Transnational Case Study of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Activism: A demonstration of how activists function as cultural intermediaries to (re) produce and challenge cultural meaning

More information

- We change the world
- The 3.5% rule: How a small minority can change the world
- How 'Good' Social Movements Can Triumph over 'Bad' Ones
- Social Movement Studies journal
- The psychology of online activism and social movements: Relations between online and offline collective action
- Culture, Power and Institutions: A Multi-Institutional Politics Approach to Social Movements
- Assessing the Explanatory Power of Social Movement Theories across the Life Course of the Civil Rights Movement

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