

What is a human rights narrative and how can it help create change?

NESRI, June 2015

*Human rights reflect shared **values** that unify **people** and build their **power** to pursue a **vision** for **transformative change**. A human rights narrative draws on these elements to counter dominant narratives that deny people's rights and maintain systems of oppression.*

Values and principles

A human rights narrative leads with values

A human rights narrative is grounded in basic shared values, which affirm the inherent worth, dignity and equality of all human beings. Human rights arise from our needs, our quest for freedom, and our pursuit of dignified lives. These values are expressed in the human rights principles of universality, equity, accountability, transparency and participation. They provide the compass for our movement and the framework for our actions and demands.

Many campaigns do not emphasize values but rather focus on factual arguments (e.g. single payer), or defend against attacks (e.g. cuts to public programs) or are directed against symbols of power (e.g. Wall Street). While such approaches may have their place in our struggles, they are insufficient to build movements that can win long-lasting change. Facts and figures are neither self-evident nor sufficiently compelling to create a long-term commitment from people to fight for change, and defensive or oppositional struggles are waged on our opponents' terrain and rarely expand our expectations and vision. Some demands risks reinforcing the dominant narrative (e.g. a focus on saving money supports austerity policies) and potentially undermine other struggles (e.g. against budget cuts). Those on the Right have long framed their campaigns as values-based appeals to individual freedom (freedom from government, that is, rather than freedom to live with dignity). A human rights narrative counters this with powerful values that reflect the experiences of people affected by injustices.

Every campaign is a battle over the framing of an issue between those who hold power and those seeking change. Framing reflects certain beliefs or ideologies, and we must be intentional about how we counter the dominant beliefs. The human rights frame speaks to people's values and experiences, lifts up people's agency and connects these to a vision for a just society.

People

A human rights narrative focuses on people and their experiences and needs

Human rights place people's needs and rights at the center of practice and policy. Human rights arise from people's fundamental needs, including health care, housing, food, education, and decent work, which are essential for living life with dignity. Unmet human needs require action from governments – whose purpose is to serve our communities - and the greatest needs and deepest injustices must be addressed first.

People's struggles for human rights have shaped the history of movements. Human rights engage people directly and deeply, and connect people's own experiences and values – centered on their well-being and that of their loved ones – to a broader set of values related to our communities and society. Dignity and equality writ large inspire a caring perspective that can expand to the social solidarity needed for collective action and for

envisioning a just society. When confronted with existing systems, institutions and policies, which fail to ensure these basic values, people are moved to a deeper political awareness and understanding of their personal experiences and their position, conditions and power in society. This raises their expectations and enables them to make judgments and take action, based on a vision of a better society rather than the artificial constraints of what is considered “politically possible.”

Power

A human rights narrative unites people and makes people the agents of change

Human rights empower people as rights-holders who can take action to claim their rights and hold governments accountable for ensuring those rights. People are not just victims or consumers: in a human rights narrative, people are agents of change.

A human rights narrative shifts the focus from individual responsibility to collective action. Instead of blaming themselves or each other, people understand the root causes of their problems. Unmet needs are neither an accident nor our own fault, but arise from unjust power relations. Human rights enable people to see their individual issues as systemic problems with common roots that can be addressed collectively. Those most impacted by injustice have a key role in leading the struggle for change.

Grounded in a systemic analysis of injustice, a human rights narrative can unite individuals and groups across traditional divisions and inoculate against opponents’ divide and conquer tactics. A human rights narrative is inclusive and leaves no one behind. It does not give rise to the formation of interest groups, but to collective struggles linked through shared values. Through creating alignment without erasing differences, people can address systems of oppression together.

Vision

A human rights narrative offers a bold, broad vision that moves from defensive to proactive demands

Human rights envision a society in which everyone can meet their fundamental needs, participate in decisions that shape their lives and live with dignity. A human rights vision is bold, broad and rises above any single issue or cause. It moves us from defensive to proactive goals: we seek to end systems of oppression by putting forward a social justice vision grounded in values and principles.

By embracing a positive vision of people’s dignity, equality and freedom, a human rights narrative avoids getting defensive, caught in oppositional frames or drawn into trade-offs and compromises. Instead of competing for concessions within the realm of what is considered possible, a human rights narrative seeks to shift the discourse and create political space for change.

A human rights narrative infuses campaign positions and demands with a principled, positive vision. For example, while the dominant narrative about health care, housing, education and jobs is characterized by individualism and market ideology, which commodifies our needs and our work, a human rights narrative recasts consumers as rights-holders and commodities as public goods.

Transformative change

A human rights narrative addresses injustices in a way that enables the transformation of society

To realize human rights in the United States, we need new political and economic structures and new ways of thinking, communicating and living. Human rights campaigns are transformative, and a human rights narrative reflects this by connecting advocacy on specific issues to a broader vision, using human rights principles.

While the failure to ensure human rights is systemic and affects everyone, some people are much more affected than others. A human rights narrative addresses both the failures of our political and economic structures, as well as the inequitable impact of those failures. It speaks up against extreme violations of human rights and demands immediate improvements, calls for an end to exclusion and marginalization, and offers a long-term vision for systemic change. Inclusion and transformation are not mutually exclusive, as long demands are guided by principles, directed at root causes, and serve as building blocks toward realizing the vision of a just society.