

# **Informal learning and promising practice within global LGBT and allied movements**

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**Abstract:** Recent global advancements in human rights related to sexual orientation and gender identity have lead organizations to seek reflection and analysis about informal learning and promising practice. This study generated fourteen promising practice narratives, which were then analysed in small cross-regional peer groups. The research reveals that many organizations already reflect appreciatively on their work, and while common themes are evident in defining and evaluating promising practice, there are clear regional and inter-movement differences warranting documentation and discussion. This methodological approach was also useful for improving practice and serving an emancipatory function for marginalized communities.

## **Literature Indicating Importance of Research**

It is well established in adult education literature that social movements are an important site of informal learning, with the capacity to affect societal transformation (Finger, 1989; Foley, 1999). This extends to the “new” social movements which include the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) movements (Welton, 1993). These movements have been recognized as a site of adult learning in a review of social movement learning in Canada (Hall & Turry, 2006).

Chovanec, Lange and Ellis (2008) propose that learning within social movements can be assessed by its ability to transform frameworks of thinking and action. There have been recent global advancements or “transformations” in human rights based on sexual orientation and gender identity that have occurred in relatively short periods of time. These have lead organizations to demand some reflection and analysis about their practice, in order to maintain and amplify these successes and explore ways of replicating them in other regions. In this study, I invite organizations connected to some of these transformations to reflect on their learning and practice, in order to add to what is known about the linkages with adult education and social movement learning.

Other researchers, such as Sessions & Cervero (2001) have specifically examined the lack of expert and independent evaluation within specific gay community organizations. While there is not independent “experts” associated with this research, participants were asked to think critically about their work in a way that was optimistic about success, and their peers were encouraged to provide critical feedback and analysis. Brookfield (2000) and Friere (1994) affirm that a critical analysis can also foster a sense of optimism and hopefulness in practice.

This study documents how civil society organizations working to advance human rights based on sexual orientation and gender identity, define and evaluate promising practice in their work. Cross-regional differences in how these groups define promising practice in relation to each other are also discussed.

Authors such as Holford (1995) express the view that there is a need for caution in accepting social movements' evaluations of themselves. This study uses a guided narrative process and cross-regional peer analysis, to address some of the critiques of pure "self-evaluation". The research and the methodological approach emphasize that being creative and critical are not oppositional and acknowledges the appreciative intelligence present in marginalized communities which demonstrate irrepressible resilience (Thatchenkery & Metzker, 2006).

This study gives voice to marginalized communities, and therefore serves an emancipatory function. This research also builds on the earlier work of Quigley & Kuhne (1997) which emphasizes the importance of reflective practice, meaning practitioners conducting systematic research in their workplace, as well as academically-based researchers working in close collaboration with practitioners to understand promising practices in their work.

It is important to note that there is not always a clear relationship between "organizations" and "movements" (Batliwala, 2008). This research does not attempt to map those relationships, but rather assumes that, at the very least, a relationship exists between these organizations and the movements that work on these issues. It is also important to note that those organizations do not always identify as "LGBT organizations" or part of an "LGBT movement", but may locate their work primarily within other specific movements or broader social movements.

### **Background and Context**

ARC International is an organization based in Switzerland and Canada, using a community leadership development model to work cooperatively with domestic and international organisations active on LGBT and related issues. It fosters the development of networks, positive communications and access to international human rights mechanisms through the development of resources and tools for advocacy. Mulabi is a non-governmental organization bringing together activists from the Global South to work on issues related to sexualities and rights from critical and celebratory perspectives, as well as to circulate Latin American perspectives on these issues. It uses the shared building of transformative knowledge as its main strategy.

In 2008, ARC International was approached by Mulabi to cooperatively engage in a large scale project ("Rising Through the Challenge") to document and analyse global best practices, noting ARC's history of facilitating global dialogue processes and producing valuable tools for advocacy, and highlighting Mulabi's strength in Global South movement building and focus on building of knowledge. As a master's student in adult education at STFX University and ARC's Co-Director simultaneously, I am well-positioned to undertake this study and to assure a level of academic rigour in undertaking this analysis to arrive at results that could inform the development of advocacy tools.

### **An appreciative methodological approach**

A new approach to reflecting and acting on practice is called participatory and appreciative action and reflection (PAAR). It explores the potential to enable individuals and groups in civil society and advocacy contexts, to understand their strengths and capacities and to move forward (through informal learning and reflection) to improve their working practices and lives in their particular communities and contexts (Ghaye et al. 2008). This research used the PAAR approach

to enable those involved in the study to reflect on their current practice with a view to sustaining and/or amplifying success in their working practices.

In June 2009, a “Call for Submissions” was issued in four languages (English, French, Spanish and Portuguese) to four large international electronic listserves, targeting LGBT organizations, but also groups that work on issues of sexual orientation from the lens of sexual and reproductive rights and health, the human rights of women, and HIV/AIDS. In addition, a broad cross-section of organizations who maintain large membership databases, were encouraged to distribute the call widely.

Organizations were invited to submit brief proposals regarding “best practices” for advancing human rights based on sexual orientation and gender identity. Using defined criteria, 14 organizations were selected from those proposals and asked to self-author a “guided narrative” of 7-10 pages in length. Those narratives focused on the participants’ experiences in practice related to advocacy and human rights based on sexual orientation and gender identity. They were “guided” in the sense that the researcher crafted a set of appreciative questions which organizations were encouraged to reflect on as they were writing their narratives.

After completion, the narratives were then presented in plenary and analyzed in small cross-regional peer groups at an International Dialogue in Buenos Aires, Argentina (January 2010) sponsored by these two organizations, entitled "Rising Through the Challenge: Documenting and Analysing Best Practices for Advancing Human Rights based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity/Expression."

### **What happened?**

Over 100 organizations from 47 different countries submitted proposals for this research. The diversity and level of response indicates that many organizations reflect appreciatively on their work. This was true even in parts of the world where issues of sexual orientation and gender identity are extremely controversial, and working in this area is very challenging. The majority of submissions were from Global South organizations, but focused from regions and countries that have experienced recent success stories. For instance, within Asia, the bulk of submissions came from India, and in Latin America, the majority of submissions were from Argentina.

The call for submissions also generated interesting regional differences in defining promising practice, which can be explained by the geo-political realities of specific regions. In the majority of Global North submissions (North America, Western Europe, and some parts of Asia and the Pacific) the promising practices were predominantly focused on addressing school-based discrimination, assisting refugees, developing Global South partnerships, international advocacy or securing same-sex relationship benefits. Virtually no Global South submissions addressed these areas of practice, but rather focused more on service delivery, political and policy advocacy in response to criminal sanctions, community and leadership development, protection of human rights defenders, and general public education, for example.

The fourteen chosen narratives for this research represented a diversity of regions and themes. The titles are listed below (full copies of narratives are available from the researcher and will be available on-line at [www.arc-international.net](http://www.arc-international.net) by Summer 2010):

1. *“Campaign for social change in Eastern Europe”*, Euroregional Center for Public Initiatives (Romania)
2. *“Grassroots community working model for organizing with lesbians in poverty”*, Gay and Lesbian Activist Network for Gender Equality Inc. (Philippines)
3. *“Four practices of integration within government programs targeting women, children and youth”*, Organización de Transexuales por la Dignidad de la Diversidad (Chil )
4. *“Empowering LGBT people through implementation of mental health programming”*, OUT Wellbeing (South Africa)
5. *“Addressing the needs of transgender and Hijra communities in India through a collaborative approach”*, Solidarity and Action Against The HIV Infection in India (India)
6. *“Learning and exchange for LGTBI activists of Latin America and Caribbean through an institute on strategies against religious fundamentalisms”*, IGLHRC (Paraguay)
7. *“Combatting homophobia in Dutch schools”*, COC (Netherlands)
8. *“Engaging with international instruments and collaborating with international organizations to transform local realities”*, GayJapan News (Japan)
9. *“Political debate, photo-exhibition and Pride campaign focused on “SEX-WORKERS RIGHTS = HUMAN RIGHTS”*, Prostitutes Interest Organisation/Skeivt Forum - Queer Student Organization (Norway)
10. ***“Public media campaign targeting homophobic lyrics of dance hall artists”***, **Suriname Men United (Suriname)**
11. *“An initiative to build the capacity of grassroots LGBT organizations in the Global South and East in countries that are particularly oppressive or dangerous for LGBT activists and individuals”*, Heartland Alliance (U.S.A.)
12. *“A diplomatic campaign to combat criminalization in Burundi”*, Humure (Burundi)
13. *“Changing discriminatory policies that impact travestis, transsexuals, and transgendered people in Argentina”*, Movimiento Antidiscriminatorio de Liberaci n (Argentina)
14. *“Training manual for the protection of LGBTI defenders”*, Protection International (U.K./Nepal)

Thirteen of the fourteen narratives were presented by the research participants/authors at the International Dialogue in Buenos Aires, Argentina in January, 2010. One participant from Burundi was unable to secure a visa to travel to Argentina, but was able to give an oral presentation via Skype to Dialogue participants. All fourteen narratives were translated and made available to Dialogue participants in advance of the small group discussions, and all cases studies were considered in the small groups, even though some authors were not able to present in-person and answer questions.

### **Defining Success**

Organizations were asked how they defined success through describing a best practice in their work. The responses in the narratives were as follows:

1. Significant political power in determining policy around sexual and reproductive rights and health. Developing strategies to address complicated issues such as religious-based intolerance. Developing tools for human rights activists on this topic. (Romania)

2. Innovative and creative models of working. Indigenous leadership development. Effective articulation of the issues directly relevant to their community (poor lesbians). (Philippines)
3. Access to medical services and training of professionals. Strategic integration into society through government agencies targeted at specific groups (women and youth, for instance). Development of community networks and visibility. (Chile)
4. Empowerment of individuals and communities through provision of health services. Advocacy for access to mainstream health services through training of professionals. (South Africa)
5. National network building and an articulation of needs and concerns. (India)
6. Unique opportunities for learning and exchange. Ability to tackle complex and challenging subjects like religious intolerance. Successful networking and strong linkages. (Paraguay)
7. Creating an empowered community of youth (gay and straight) to work within the school system to address homophobia. (Netherlands)
8. Developing skills and leadership to engage with international human rights instruments. Policy change at the local level as a result of advocacy. (Japan)
9. Developing new and unique partnerships/collaborations. Creating space for debate/discussion on controversial topics. Using a human rights framework in creative ways. (Norway)
10. Using media and allies to engage in mass public awareness. Changing corporate practices through public pressure. (Suriname)
11. Building sustainable civil society organizations in the Global South and reducing reliance on North-based funding intermediaries. (U.S.A.)
12. Successful advocacy strategies for countries heavily dependant on foreign aid, which link that funding to the protection of human rights. (Burundi)
13. Inclusion within the primary and secondary education and access to health systems. (Argentina)
14. Engagement with the LGBT community to develop practical tools for human rights defenders. (UK/Nepal)

### **Factors for Evaluating Success**

#### *Differences*

One of the goals of this research was to examine regional differences in defining and evaluating success, but it is important to note that there is not a homogeneous movement that works on issues such as sexual orientation and gender identity. Often the narratives demonstrated that the specific community, or the issue of focus within particular organizations, also contributed to different definitions of success. For instance, youth, transgendered communities, and poor lesbians identified visibility and articulation of their issues as key to defining success. These populations work at the margins of most LGBT movements.

It was interesting to note that the groups from Africa emphasized a service delivery approach as a vehicle for empowerment and success in their work. This was consistent with other submissions from Africa, some of which used HIV/AIDS delivery programs, which have legitimacy and funding support on the continent, to develop successful practices for empowerment and rights based advocacy. This emphasis on service delivery or rather lack of access to mainstream services emerged in the narratives from transgendered-specific organizations, as well.

In countries where there are some legacies of human rights protection, political power, policy change, access to educational institutions, supporting work in other regions and engaging with international instruments were identified as success. However, small group discussions noted the huge disparity between these narratives (mostly from the Global North) and those from other Global South regions. It was a struggle for the small groups to identify strategies that could be replicated or were applicable in other countries. In addition, there was critique that those groups discussing community empowerment and service delivery models were not able to demonstrate the clear connections with successful advocacy work.

### *Commonalities*

There were many common elements of success emerging from the narratives and small group discussions. These are consistent with best practices research conducted within other movements, specifically from gender advocacy, action and analysis (Miller, 2001).

*linkages/alliances.* It was consistently noted throughout the narratives and discussions, that success is highly correlated with establishing strategic alliances. For groups with very little economic or political power, alliances are extremely important. It was also clear that forming alliances has to be holistic in approach, recognizing the common elements that may oppress a number of people, such as restrictions on sexual and reproductive rights or laws on prostitution and trafficking.

*leadership development.* All groups were asked to think about leadership and commented on the importance of this to their work. One group specifically addressed this from an interesting cost-benefit analysis and noted that developing a leader, who is endemic to the community being organized, does away with the time and resources necessary to immerse the organizer in the context and culture of the community. This also does away with the need for the organizer to gain the trust and confidence of the community.

*processes for working.* A number of groups across a variety of regions highlighted their unique processes for working or organizational models. For some, this was a multi-pronged approach. Some identified the design of their working processes as equal to the development of leaders and their alliance building.

*training/skills building.* Almost all narratives discussed success in this area. For some groups this was as fundamental as providing opportunities for primary and secondary education and ensuring rights to life through protection strategies.

*engagement and empowerment of community.* This was expressed as an area of challenge but immense power when strategies are successful. Some groups worked hard to counter sentiments of apathy within specific communities, and measured success in various ways. This presented more of a challenge in regions where there are not specific laws targeting LGBT people, but discrimination continues. Service delivery was also discussed as a tool for empowering individuals and communities.

*development of strategies and agenda.* Some communities discussed in the narratives had never come together until very recently to develop strategies and agendas. Many felt that until they engaged until an active process to do this, they were engaged in an endless cycle of responding to violations without a clear goal of where they could go as a movement to stop the violations.

*practical tools.* Many groups noted the importance of translating knowledge and success into tools that can assist other groups or individuals. In many cases, the development of these tools contributed to other areas of success, such as engagement and empowerment.

*reflective practice and evaluation.* Obviously all participating organizations engage in some level of reflective practice, given their self-referral to this research project. However, the narratives make specific references to methods of reflection, evaluation, and analysis, as a factor in their success.

### **Final Thoughts**

Several groups commented in the discussions, that the process of writing the narrative and participating in the peer analysis was very useful for them and will further change how they do their work. They obviously knew their project was a success, but the process of engaging in this participatory and appreciative action and reflection research will allow them to amplify their success in ways they had not anticipated. This represents a strong affirmation for this methodological approach for working within social movements.

One aspect that did not emerge strongly in the submissions, but does emerge from other best practice research on advocacy, is the area of investigation and dissemination (Miller, 2001). One of the unique aspects of this movement, compared to others, is its relative “newness” and relationship to new technologies such as the internet. It could be that investigation and dissemination are so integral to the global sharing of information inherent in the work of many of these organizations that it does not appear as a distinct area of work, or it may reflect a weakness in this movement compared to others. Further research on investigation and documentation within the LGBT movement is likely needed.

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