

# “Resource politics and social justice: Key challenges for policy and practice”



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I always balk a little when “social justice” is framed as a “policy challenge”.

Often (though not always) it invokes a view that social injustice is like a patient that has succumbed to some malady that a quick rummage around the doctor’s medicine bag will correct.

The standard remedies are to be found in numerous reports from varied international financial institution, think-tanks, non-governmental organisations and bilateral aid agencies. Perhaps a course of “participatory consultation” or the regular application of a soothing “safeguards” balm, suitably fortified with the latest formulation of “prior informed consent” or “labour standards”. Maybe, in extreme cases, a shot of land reform. Sometimes, the doctor shrugs and says there is nothing that can be done while the patient lives in overcrowded conditions and files the case with social services. Meanwhile, more alternative practitioners (perhaps like myself) hover at the door, urging a course of action that has been formulated with added “class analysis”.

The doctor writes out the script and moves on to the next patient involving another rummage in the bag. The patient’s friends and family troop down to the surgery to submit the prescription. Sometimes the pharmacist hands the medicine over. More often than not, the response is that it will all cost too much. Maybe a mini riot ensues. Maybe not. Maybe the patient dies. Maybe they recover. Articles get written and news reports screened in which those who comment on these things have two minutes to explain why the medicine did or did not work. The audience mutters “it’s all so unfair” or, alternatively, “that’s life”. More reports are written. More images of starving children adorn their covers. More bullet point recommendations are churned out. More ministers lobbied. More email sign-ons are sent. And so the cycle goes on.

Of course, this is a caricature. And I apologise now if it does a violence to the dedicated work of numerous development professionals around the world.

But I would like to question the view of “social justice” as something that can be achieved through delving into some policy medicine chest. A dam project or a land grab does not become “just” because the right policy boxes have been ticked. For justice, like class, is an evolving set of relationships that are never fixed but constantly being created and recreated. You cannot achieve social justice by inserting it into a project because it does not exist in a form that can ever be “inserted”.

Here I would like to play a short clip from an interview given by my colleague Larry Lohmann, who eloquently summarises a very different view of justice that accords more with his experience of working with movements around the world. He was asked, “What needs to change to achieve justice?” Here’s his response:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8hMmr4rgMWk&list=PL2tuXXfyo5WSt6fH9uM6e5oomAcLQiBFR&index=18>

As Larry says, “When the cry of injustice goes up from a crowd, it is usually an expression of a consciousness in the making. What’s happening to us? How does it happen? How does it work? Who is doing this to us? How are they making alliances against us? What alliances should we make?”

This is a sort of dynamic process of discussion and enlightenment. And it involves what Ashish Nandy, the Indian political psychologist, used to call “an expansion in the awareness of oppression”.

Larry goes on to critique the idea of “justice” as “a ready-made thing” that can be “put into any existing project, no matter how unjust.”

And he observes: “For me and the people I work with most closely, this is not the kind of justice we work with. For us justice is more a process of discovery of oppression and discovery of strategies for dealing with it.”

This is a very different approach to justice-as-bullet-points or justice as an injectable.

The differences are many but here are just two that I think may help in taking forward the discussion today on the key challenges for policy and practice in resource politics and social justice:

- For sure, “policy demands” are likely to emerge from the “process of discovery” that Larry talks about. But they are not demands that are shaped by an abstract notion of “justice” or by what might best resonate with a busy parliamentarian or Minister. They arise from the pressing need to building alliances and to expand political space. And their audience is not “policy makers” or “decision makers” in the abstract or some imaginary group of supremely powerful global or national regulators. It is primarily other social movements, allies within academia, sympathetic government officials and others with whom alliances – some tactical, some longer-term and more rooted – are sought.
- Social justice is a work in progress, not a work that has been completed. The “process of discovery” is not some treasure hunt in which the jewel of “justice” is uncovered, resplendently cut by some past jeweller. The process of discovery itself shapes “justice” through the relationships it forms and the new class conflicts that may emerge from those relationships. Who one travels with in this process is critical and the connections between struggles that are made, ruptured and reworked in the process are what allow those struggles to breathe and expand. Trying to reduce any one struggle, let alone the multiple struggles that make for the formation of new social movements, to a set of neat “policy demands” is often to miss what is most important.

A social justice that is rooted in and shaped by the processes of discovery, connecting and mutual learning demands a practice and approach to politics that is, I believe, very different from the approach increasingly adopted by many non-governmental organisations today. It is not an activism that rejects reports or demonstrations or lobbying; but it is an activism that emphasises the building of long-term relationships over short-term, in-and-out, often opportunistic, “campaigns” driven by funding priorities or the need to present “policy” to the next international conference.

Above all, it is an activism that, I think, would recognise (and not be flummoxed by) the description of Mexican activist Gustavo Esteva of “friendship” as the “political tool of the moment”.<sup>1</sup> To many, this may seem as fanciful as the “horticultural quietism” (to use Julian Barnes’ phrase<sup>2</sup>) recommended by Voltaire’s *Candide* as the most practical response to the horrors that humans are capable of inflicting on each other (“Il faut cultiver notre jardin” – “We must tend our own garden”). Most NGO colleagues would recognise the value of friendship in campaigning, but the notion that it might be an important goal of campaigning, let alone an organising principle for campaigning, would strike many as bizarre. As a tool for action, friendship cuts no political ice. It lacks the hard edge of reports, policy briefs, talking points, internet appeals and Avaaz-style email bombardments. It is too homely and unengaged in the real world of politics.

But for me and those I work with, it is only within the space engendered by the patient, long-term building of relationships of care, trust, mutual learning and unlearning that the process of discovery that is social justice can take place. It is only within this space that realistic strategies for breaking beyond “reformist reforms” emerge. For an activism that emerges from this space is an activism rooted in the concrete everyday struggles of people the world over to find ways around the obstacles that prevent *their* creating the world *they* want.

But it is an activism that is unlikely to be start with the question: “what are your policy proposals?” A more promising opening is the more abrasive: “Whose side are you on?”

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<sup>1</sup> Gustavo Esteva, “Aid – No thanks! If anyone wants to do you any good, run away”. Presentation to ‘Giornata di dialogo tra movimenti’, Florence, Italy, 8 April 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Julian Barnes, “A candid review of *Candide*”, *The Guardian*, 1 July 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jul/01/candide-voltaire-rereading-julian-barnes>.