

From the Editorial Board

Mobilizing Social Justice: A Narrow But Significant Space

Jeff Handmaker

This edition of *DevISSues* is devoted to perspectives from development practitioners, revealing certain opportunities and constraints faced by civic advocates in advocating for the realization of human rights and social justice. Accordingly, this edition presented a personal challenge for me, having researched the capacity of civic actors to hold states accountable to their human rights obligations. This led me to ask the question: can a deeper and more critical understanding of civic efforts to mobilize social justice be helpful to practitioners, operating in the *real world*? Turning the question around: can social justice advocates, and the donors and solidarity groups that support them, be more *strategic* in evaluating the potential of their interventions, or in extending solidarity and support to locally-based groups?

To engage with these questions, seven papers were commissioned from social justice practitioners who have a long experience and a critical perspective, and are therefore well positioned to engage with these questions.

Olujic addresses contemporary human rights and social justice issues in the Netherlands. While many Dutch people take their human rights 'for granted', the situation is different for those of a particular background (especially Muslims). The famous Dutch tolerance is under threat, both in the Netherlands and within Europe more generally. Human rights, Olujic argues, 'is everybody's business'. Roozendaal follows this theme in his contribution, exploring whether homosexuality, only recently tolerated in the Netherlands, is in fact a 'clash between cultures'. While the rights of LGBT people in Africa have been mainly articulated by Western voices, Roozendaal argues that local human rights groups in Africa should be given more space to take the lead in these debates. Berkhout and Seela follow, questioning whether conventional human rights strategies based on *the rule of law* show the most potential. Arguing against 'tunnel vision', they draw the conclusion, similar to Roozendaal, that social justice advocates, and the donors who support them, must take culture more seriously in mobilizing human rights and social justice. Suharto's contribution directly engages with culture. After reconceptualizing conventional understandings of disability to a *diffability* perspective, he argues that empowerment, rather than rehabilitation, is a more relevant and productive approach to advocating social justice for people who suffer some form of impairment, particularly in a developing country.

The remaining papers cover an enduring theme in social justice advocacy, namely the Palestinian struggle for human rights and social justice, and explore the potential to draw relevant lessons and inspiration from the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa. Barghouti explains how Palestinian scholars have been affected by Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories. Drawing on several examples ranging from the closure of Palestinian academic institutions to the deliberate destruction of these institutions, she underscores the Palestinian call for a boycott of Israeli academic institutions. This call, she argues, both 'heighten(s) awareness' on the plight of Palestinians generally, and scholars in particular, and is part of a broader, civic-led struggle of non-violent resistance to Israel's violations of Palestinian rights. Ngeleza and Vallie share their reflections as prominent social justice advocates in South Africa, noting similarities between the pre-1994 struggle against apartheid in their country and the Palestinian struggle for social justice, arguing that both were/are engaged in confronting an apartheid state. They observe that the strategic decision to push for boycotts, divestments and sanctions (BDS) in South Africa proved a turning point in the anti-apartheid struggle there, and a 'similar process may be at work in Palestine today'. Finally, Nieuwhof reflects on the role of global solidarity to help end an authoritarian regime. She reflects on the importance of strategic thinking for global advocates of social justice when extending solidarity to locally-based civic advocates.

From a researcher's perspective, three points are notable in these contributions. First, all authors note the importance of strategic thinking, while vividly illustrating the *capacity* of civic actors to advocate for state accountability, using a variety of (non-violent) means. In other words, civic actors are active participants in international and national legal processes and combine this with other forms of civic mobilization. Secondly, authors confirm the value of materialist explanations for civic advocacy, acknowledging that shifts in the structural dimensions of a social justice struggle – whether these dimensions are cultural, political or social – frame or *condition* the possibilities for civic action. These shifts must be clearly understood and engaged with by social justice advocates if they want to succeed. Finally, from a socio-legal studies perspective, social justice advocacy fulfils a crucial *mediating* role, translating global human rights protection in a locally relevant context. In short, the contributions in this edition of *DevISSues* confirm my personal contention, arguably also reflected in other contemporary social-justice struggles, that civic advocacy operates in a *narrow, but significant space*. The space is *narrow* in that it is heavily framed by state interests, but also *significant* in its potential to precipitate progressive structural changes (Handmaker 2009, with Berkhout, 2010 and with Dugard and Klaaren, forthcoming in 2011).

The guest editor of this edition of *DevISSues* is currently a lecturer and convenor of the Human Rights, Development and Social Justice specialization at the ISS. He is also an Honorary Research Fellow in the Wits School of Law and Chair of the 3R Foundation (www.stichting3r.nl).

About the cover

Demonstrators with cardboard signs outside Pretoria High Court. Photo by Louise White, Australia.