

# BRINGING INTERNATIONAL CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS TOGETHER TO FORM AN ALLIANCE AGAINST INEQUALITY

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## INTRODUCTION

Civil society organisations (CSOs) are increasingly recognising the need for a stronger collective effort to fight the causes of inequality, and a group of them have started to work in alliance under the banner **#fightinequality**. It is still the early days of what is intended not as a one-year branded mobilisation around an intergovernmental event, but as a multi-year process of organising power from below to narrow the gap between the haves and have nots, and between men and women. At ActionAid, we have played the role of convenor of the groups involved. As these efforts now begin to gather pace, it is a good time to explore what led to this alliance forming, what lessons might be learned and what type of movement is needed to succeed.

## THE NEED FOR AN ALLIANCE

Several factors have encouraged these organisations to come together and begin to work in alliance over the last year towards a bigger struggle against inequality. Firstly, there are external factors: changes in the real world make this a necessary fight. Organisations across many sectors, including the women’s movement, trade unions, environmentalists, human rights defenders, development organisations, faith based organisations, civil society networks and more, have seen how their struggles for a fairer and more sustainable world are being threatened by the concentration of power and wealth in the hands of fewer elites. That power is concentrated in the one per cent is not an exaggeration, but an understatement: it’s an even smaller group than that. The gap between the richest and the rest has reached levels not seen in a century. Runaway inequality is not a reality that any of us can ignore.

This has been illustrated starkly with statistics, such as those published in January 2016 highlighting how 62 people now own the same wealth as half the world, with the gap continuing to grow beyond expectations.<sup>1</sup> This has been accompanied by a severe shrinking of political space for civil society and activists in countries around the world, as extensively documented by CIVICUS. While many CSOs, ActionAid included, have been tackling inequality for decades, this new trend requires a larger scale effort, or we risk playing for smaller and smaller gains while the systemic transformation we desire moves further and further out of reach.

1 ‘62 people own same as half world – Oxfam’, Oxfam, 18 January 2016, <http://bit.ly/1PIORS7>.

It is not statistics that have driven the revived interest in inequality, but the raw lived experience that CSOs bear witness to everyday. While the statistics offer a snapshot of the problem and the mess we are in, the story of inequality is ultimately a human one. It is with the poorest and most excluded people where the problem of inequality wreaks the greatest harm, and where the hope for change begins. People's lived experiences tell the tale of an unjust economic system, and of power relations that need to change fundamentally in order to reverse the soaring levels of economic inequality. They tell of the need to challenge the inequalities of power that are so embedded in the daily lives of the poorest and most marginalised.

The internal factor pushing organisations to work together is a recognition from a number of CSO leaders that CSOs need to change, need to take sides with social movements, challenge power more fundamentally, and grasp the nettle of doing the right thing instead of the easy thing.

In 2014 a number of largely global south civil society leaders shared an open letter to activists around the world, in which they affirmed the need to reflect critically on the role of CSOs, and to challenge ourselves in civil society to play the fullest role possible in creating the transformative change we seek.<sup>2</sup> These views are still relevant. The global organising principles that they set out to help reshape and reorient the struggle for the world that we want are worth rereading. Civil society is coming in for increasing criticism, both from within and outside. Being clear on the principles which will lead to the change we must achieve in the world is a first step, instead of drifting into trading in incremental change.

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## WHAT TYPE OF ALLIANCE AND WHY?

So, given the scenario above, what is the type of alliance that is needed, and why? At ActionAid our assessment is that a systemic analysis of the drivers of inequality, and a collective and positive vision of the solutions, and a building up of collective power, are all essential.

The diversity of the movement is a key strength, in terms of its origins, breadth, reach and range of perspectives and learning. At the same time, the alliance has not been organised on the basis of partnering with every CSO irrelevant of their worldview and approach. The group is united by a commitment to addressing the systemic nature of the challenge, by movements coming together to change the power relations at the heart of the problem.

One of our key learnings is for this alliance to build power from below, from the grassroots level. This is where the experience of inequalities is lived on a day to day basis, and where struggles are already being fought and won, and fought and lost. It is time to build from here and elevate the struggle - to the national level, and the international level.

<sup>2</sup> 'An open letter to our fellow activists across the globe: Building from below and beyond borders', CIVICUS, 6 August 2014, <http://bit.ly/1r7qJuV>.

## WHAT'S THE AGENDA?

The shared agenda is both radical and bold in its vision.

Timed to challenge and show up the complacency of elites meeting at the World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2016, we issued a joint statement, signalling our organisation's intent to step up the fight together and spelling out more about what that will look like.<sup>3</sup>

The establishment has registered that there is a problem. From international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund to the World Bank, and with governments setting a goal on reducing inequality as part of the Sustainable Development Goals, it can be seen that there is growing agreement that inequality is bad and must be tackled. But the consensus on what is actually required to tackle the problem does not yet stretch further than that. ActionAid, along with others in the alliance, has found that we cannot rely on the market, or the state or corporations to do the right thing. Ending inequality will primarily involve people holding the powerful to account at all levels in greater numbers, and with greater collective power. Where there are examples of governments having introduced innovative public policies that have countered this trend, for example the Brazilian Family Farmers credit and the Indian National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, the organising of poor and excluded people has been an essential part of winning change.

## LESSONS WE NEED TO LEARN

Inequalities are intersectional. It is crucial to consider gender, race, class, caste and ethnicity, amongst other inequalities, when trying to understand the discrimination people face, and to shift power on a greater scale. It is not only about wealth. It is a lot about power, in all its forms.

At ActionAid we have seen clearly in our work for change in 45 countries around the world over the last 40 years that we need to be honest about our role in creating change. We are an international CSO, not a social movement. However, we partner with and support a range of social movements in countries from Brazil to Nepal. We must be more open to being challenged and changed by those movements, and to putting our collective power more at the service of vibrant movements.

We need to take our lead from people already at the front line of the fight, like the women I met recently in Kapchorwa District in Eastern Uganda, who were building their power via a cooperative to take on a range of inequalities, from earning a living as smallholder farmers, through to owning land, combatting violence against women and pressing for their rights to free and quality public services such as health and education. It's inspiring work. And organisations that are now convening nationally in alliance in Uganda, and at international level, need to ask ourselves how we get more on their side.

<sup>3</sup> 'Civil society leaders issue statement to step up the fight on inequality', ActionAid, 20 January 2016, <http://bit.ly/1RT8giu>.

The strongest alliances are built around a shared political vision, from which an agenda and theory of change are built. Convening this takes time, patience, discussion, trial and error. Collective action needs to be built from people's experiences, both of inequalities, and how they are already working to fight them. It needs to be built from trust, and from a shared vision of how we will create change. It is long term, not a quick fix directed at the next international summit.

## WHERE NEXT?

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The work of building an alliance is only just beginning. The next stages are to broaden those around the table involved in building this vision from the start. Most importantly, this means more southern groups and more from the feminist movement. A deepening of collective strategy is needed, so that over the coming years we move further from vision to strategy to action, to create a movement of national alliances, built from the local realities of the inequalities people are experiencing. The task for 2016 is to build power from below, and ensure we are building an international movement that adds power to those struggles collectively. The task is huge, but collectively we are equal to it. We don't have a moment to lose.