

Actions for Change

Brian Martin is chair of the board of Illawarra Citizen Advocacy and has been involved with social movements for several decades. In this article he says that individual action, small group actions, and large social movement all play a role in creating a better future – different actions are needed at different times, when change is sought.

Chris has a wonderful life: she has friends, satisfying work, good health, a nice home and an enthusiasm for learning. Her significant intellectual disability does not seem to make much of a difference because of support from friends, employer, health workers and others. That's the way that society might operate — but unfortunately seldom does. In the real world, Chris is more likely to be living in a group home or an institution, lack any meaningful work, to have few or no friends, to be repeatedly let down by 'the system', and to be excluded from the general community.

What can be done to move towards a more inclusive society? The first step is individual action: service workers who care can develop their skills to bring about better results for Chris. Neighbours and others who know about Chris can take the initiative to meet her and to make her part of the community. This happens occasionally, but not often enough. Citizen Advocacy programs are needed because there is not enough spontaneous advocacy by family and friends. As society becomes ever more fragmented, greater efforts are needed to create community bonds.

Individual action is vital, but it often runs up against bureaucratic barriers. The next step is fighting the system. A recent example is one where three citizen advocates made a complaint about the institution where their protégés lived. This led to a formal investigation, and for plans to close the institution. This sort of action happens occasionally, but again, not often enough. Also, it has limits: some systems have the capacity for internal reform, but others are highly resistant to change. People in top positions in many systems often put a higher priority on internal control than on addressing problems.

When a service worker reports a colleague for abuse of clients, or reports the misuse of an organisation's money, that person is likely to suffer harassment, ostracism, threats or even dismissal on trumped-up charges. Blowing the whistle is seldom an effective way to bring about change. Action by individuals and small groups is absolutely vital, but to really make a difference this action needs to be tied to a wider programme of change. When enough people have a vision of an alternative society, and are willing to work towards achieving it, this is called a social movement. Familiar examples would be the feminist movement, the peace movement, and the environmental movement.

Social movements typically have a relatively small number of hard-working core members, a larger group of supporters who may provide financial assistance or join occasional activities, and an even larger group of passive sympathisers. All these layers are necessary for a movement to be effective. A growing movement mobilises sympathisers to become supporters, and for supporters to become activists.

Some movements are reactionary: their goals are oriented to the past, such as a call for a white Australia. Other movements draw their inspiration from imagined futures that go beyond the present or past. A movement for full development and inclusion of all people, regardless of ability, is one such future-directed movement. Some movements, such as the labour movement, are composed primarily of those who stand to benefit from the movement's success. (Note that the labour movement should be distinguished from the Labor Party, just as the

green movement is broader than the Green Party. It is quite possible to be in a movement but not in a political party.)

There is a long history of movements that act on behalf of others. For example, the anti-slavery movement was largely made up of free people; and many peace activists are not those who are at personal risk in wars. These sorts of movements are built on altruism rather than on self-interest. To maximise support for people with disabilities, a movement needs people without disabilities.

A movement helps to harness energy and mobilise participation. Actions can take many forms, from rallies to lobbying, and from door-to-door canvassing to casual conversations. Successful movements will eventually change people's ways of looking at the world. For example, environmentalism has now become taken for granted to the extent that polluting businesses tout their allegedly 'green' policies as a way of promoting themselves in the community.

However, movements are not guaranteed to succeed. The peace movement has a long history of peaks and troughs, with periods of mass mobilisation and then years of relative inaction. One of the dangers to social movements is the bureaucratisation of activism: activists obtain jobs and become part of the system, operating through inside channels and discouraging popular protest.

It's not possible to manufacture a social movement out of nothing, but nonetheless the movement model has much to offer. The first element is a vision of a desirable future – something that will inspire participants. Next is the willingness of a small core of individuals to put in significant amounts of energy promoting the ideal behind the movement. Finally, it is vital to develop a strategy, namely a plausible road between the current reality and the desired future. It might involve reaching out to new potential allies, taking direct action, or producing educational materials. Astute activists will learn from trial and error, all the while keeping an ear to the ground for social trends.

Individual action, small group actions, and large social movement — all can play a role in creating a better future.