

Rights Roundtable

Interview by B. Jesse Clarke

Participants

- **Juliet Ellis**, Executive Director, Urban Habitat
- **Phaedra Ellis-Lamkins**, Executive Director, Green for All, Former Director, Working Partnerships USA
- **Dorothy Kidd**, Co-Chair of Media Alliance and Professor of Media Studies, University of San Francisco.
- **Adam Kruggel**, Director, Contra Costa Interfaith Supporting Community Organization
- **Shalini Nataraj**, Vice President of Programs, Global Fund for Women
- **Renee Saucedo**, Community Empowerment Coordinator, La Raza Centro Legal

Clarke: One of the themes that we're trying to investigate is whether you make a rights framework (tenants' rights, workers' rights, immigrants' rights) part of your organizing work. The United States has a long tradition of civil rights with a certain level of successful organizing, particularly to gain equal rights for African Americans and overcome the legacy of slavery. But people organizing around the right to a job or the right to housing have a much more challenging environment. It's not a given that people believe that you actually have a right to housing or a right to a job or a right to freedom to control your own social and economic participation.

Do you organize around expanding civil rights to embrace a broader concept of social and economic rights? What are some of the strengths of this approach? What are some of the drawbacks that you've run into? Whyen do you or don't you use it when you're working on specific campaigns?

Kidd: The international network, "Our Media", is made up of advocates in community radio and video and in human rights groups and other social movement groups who are fighting for national legislation to protect independent and alternative media.

Internationally, for about the last 10 years, people have been trying to use the idea of communication rights as an umbrella to bring all of those groups together. Many groups, particularly in Latin America and India, already use a human rights framework that is a lot wider than that used in the United States and includes social, political, and economic rights. The idea of communication rights resonates with a lot of organizations in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. The people's right to be able to communicate links groups fighting for better water, quality education, women's rights, and many other issues.

Urban Habitat

Urban Habitat is a 20-year-old social and environmental justice organization. The framework we use focuses on a large definition of environmental justice. It allows us to work on different issues over time. Our organization has worked on everything from food security and jobs to land use, transportation, and affordable housing, all

under the umbrella of trying to ensure that low-income and communities of color are able to impact decisions that affect our lives. The issues may change over time but this kind of larger framework—building around constituents having voice, having power, being able to control their destinies, looking at issues of disproportionate impact—is the common thread. In the last

couple of years we have dealt a lot more with housing and transportation and their connection with quality jobs. But if you were to look back five years ago, 10 years ago, there were different issues on the table, yet we still supported marginalized communities that usually don't have the voice to impact decisions.

—Juliet Ellis, Executive Director

The problem in the United States is that those rights are not taken for granted. The United States government has not signed on to the United Nations covenant for social, political, and economic rights. But some groups are trying to not only organize at the grassroots for the right to quality media but also for groups to be able to direct their own media to represent themselves. The rights approach can be useful. But the problem comes in when people think of rights as something that can be secured through law or through courts. That's not going to happen for a long time.

Saucedo: We absolutely put organizing around immigration rights issues and immigrant workers' issues into the framework of building human rights in the United States. Because the mainstream media almost always uses the term "illegal immigrant," migration gets characterized as a criminal issue rather than as a product of international economic policies that force people to leave their loved ones behind, and risk their lives to come to the United States for any work that they can find.

Huge challenges go along with that. It justifies oppression against immigrant communities through intense enforcement and denial of benefits. The opposition is formidable. It's an uphill battle. Not that we don't or can't win, because we do, thanks to the courage and inspiration of the immigrants themselves. But as long as the discussion around immigration or immigrants' rights is limited to punitive law enforcement, we have to keep working on really making it part of a larger human rights framework.



Nataraj: We use the human rights framework to assess the proposals that come to us for funding, but in some circumstances—in the midst of occupation conflicts, such as in Iraq—that may not be very strongly articulated. So we work with groups where they are, while striving for the systematic and transformative change that has to happen in order for women's rights to be honored and valued.

Rene Saucedo was just speaking about the rights of migrant workers and the factors that send them in search of economic and human security. We try to address that on the other side, on the ground, in these communities; to see what women need to really push their own agendas, to promote their rights to sustainable development and for a voice in the decisions and policies of their countries. The United States has a very heavy footprint all over the world. We see a strong linkage between what we do overseas and how that expresses itself here in this country.

Photo:

The National Alliance of Domestic Workers was founded at the United States Social Forum in 2007.

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Working Partnerships USA

Working Partnerships was created as a partnership between the labor movement and communities of color and the faith communities. It started out of a regional labor federation that has about 110,000 members who came together with community groups to figure out how to transform the new economy that is being created

through technology and make sure that working people have a voice and that the solutions being created actually make their lives better. We've done everything from universal health care legislation for children, to small business [development], to living wages. And now we're trying to figure out how to leverage those public and private investments into change that's

measurable We ask ourselves how to connect the labor movement with people of color and faith communities to create a majority that's capable of contesting for power and change. Our strategy is based on building power to make change happen.

—Phaedra Ellis-Lamkins,
Former Executive Director WPUSA,
Incoming Director, Green for All

Ellis-Lamkins: We also use a human rights framework. When it comes to the right to organize [as described in the Declaration of Human Rights, we are specific. Beyond that, we try to make the case that people have fundamental rights to healthcare and housing, and we talk about what that looks like. People respond well when we talk about opportunity. For example, when we say children should have an opportunity for a good education and point out that a smart child from a low-income background performs worse in school than a less-intelligent child from a more financially stable family, people respond.

When you say, “Look, we want to figure out what conditions people need to be able to succeed,” you get to rights, but you also look at the process of how you get there. We don’t ever just start and say, “Everyone should have healthcare.” We start with, “Kids don’t do well.” And then you graduate to, “And parents can’t participate in school when they don’t have healthcare or when they don’t have time because there isn’t housing that people can afford in their community so they end up commuting two hours a day.”

I think the framework is right but the process of how we get there is as critical as the framework.

Ellis: Based on my experience at Urban Habitat, the idea that everyone is entitled to human rights runs counter to United States culture. Whether you talk about housing or healthcare or gay and lesbian rights or folks who are incarcerated, it’s not generally accepted that people have intrinsic rights.

At Urban Habitat, we’ve defined environmental justice very broadly: people have the right to live, work, and play in environments where they’re not burdened disproportionately by toxics or by a lack of education or lack of transportation.

We also promote the general concept of what we are for: environmental justice, economic justice, social justice, equal access, opportunity, and self-determination. But we very often don’t approach the conversation with the idea that there are basic human rights that people are afforded. And I think it’s unfortunate, because if you want to get to the systemic issues the country and the world are facing, the central problem is that there are haves and have-nots. In fact, some people have rights and some people don’t. Whatever human right you are talking about, most of the communities we work with are the “have-nots.” For many people, it’s a big leap to say that everyone is entitled to a certain level of rights.

Kruggel: To consider how we are called to live with one another, we draw on some of the many different faith traditions that have given us teachings and reflections on this over the last several thousand years. All of the work we do is shaped by the idea that we are “created in the image of the creator.” We believe that every person, by virtue of their birth, is sacred and precious and that we are called to build a world that honors that sacred value. Within that there are core values that shape how we build our society—one being that the needs of people be provided.

La Raza Centro Legal

La Raza Centro Legal in San Francisco sponsors several programs, among them the San Francisco Day Labor Program and the Women’s Collective. We work with day laborers and domestic workers, many of them undocumented migrants. Through our organization, they find work in a dignified manner and are able to empower themselves and organize around issues that impact their lives.

At the San Francisco Day Labor Program, we provide our members with comprehensive services, including leader-

ship development and organizing. Members decide what they need in order to be able to find productive employment and to assert their legal rights as workers. We provide job referrals, training, and support services to prepare individuals for the work force.

Our program develops the leadership of these workers, not only locally but also at a national and regional level, so they can protect their own rights. Our national organization is the National Day Labor Organizing Network. The Women’s Collective (which consists of domestic workers) is

part of the National Alliance of Domestic Workers. Participants learn about the law and educate fellow workers, organize pickets against unscrupulous employers, campaign to stop police harassment of day laborers on street corners, and obtain dignified space for day laborers’ centers. This year our main campaign dealt with national immigration reform. One of our central tenets is that members decide which campaigns they work on, including the agenda, and strategies involved.

—Renee Saucedo, Community Empowerment Coordinator

When we talk about rights in this country, we talk a lot about the Constitution. When we work with immigrants, we spend a lot of time talking about what the Constitution means. The Constitution isn't just for citizens. It doesn't just apply to legal residents. It applies to everybody. Regardless of your country of origin, regardless of where you're at, you have rights, by virtue of the values that shape our country.

We believe, in a very clear, programmatic sense, that people have rights to healthcare, to adequate shelter, to quality education, to work, and to live in a healthy community.

Right now, nationally, we're having this debate about the fundamental right to quality affordable healthcare. That's indisputable. If you don't have healthcare, you will die in this world. It's a central right and need that everyone has.

But to win your rights, you need to have the power to compel. We don't always invoke the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, because we're trying to build power. We're not trying to rest on documents; we're trying to create power to create new things. We have an over-arching vision that people have all these rights but we try to scaffold it by building power and being strategic and helping to create change.

I think the limitation of rights language is that it fails to communicate the urgency of the action that people need to take to make rights real, to make them active and alive in our society. It has this danger



of becoming a rhetorical device or a platitude. The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights is a beautiful document, but the UN has no power to make it real. I think it's a vision and an aspiration that's beautiful but it's meaningless if we're not building power to create those concrete changes.

Clarke: I'm interested in the ways in which the rights framework can bridge some of the tensions that historically exist between groups that should be progressive allies but actually end up working at cross-purposes or in opposition when it comes to certain kinds of political issues.

In what ways are you building change within existing institutions that have historical tensions—or building alliances among constituencies that sometimes haven't worked together?

Photo:

PICO organizers travel to Washington D.C. to fight foreclosures.

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Courtesy of PICO

Contra Costa Interfaith Supporting Community Organization (CCISCO)

CCISCO is based in one of the fastest-growing counties in California. It has undergone tremendous demographic transformation over the last 10 years. We have the largest population of young people and the highest homicide rate for people ages 16 to 24, in the Bay Area. It's a tremendously diverse county that's home to crushing poverty and fantastic prosperity. Our work centers on the issue of equity, how you build regional and local communities

that are equitable and have opportunity for all people.

We work in cities like Pittsburg, Antioch, and Richmond, California that have been some of the most violent and deadly cities in the state and the country. They've been at the epicenter of a number of crises, with some of the lowest educational attainment and high school graduation rates in the state, and some of the highest foreclosure rates in neighborhoods with some of the highest unemployment rates. These communities are just a few miles away from some

of the wealthiest and most prosperous communities and cities in the country.

We primarily work through institutions that exist in religious congregations within communities. We also work with neighborhood councils and schools. We have close to 40 different religious denominations that we currently organize with across the country. And so our constituency is incredibly diverse and it bridges a diverse geography over race/class, ethnicity, language, and generational differences.

—Adam Kruggel, Director



Ellis-Lamkins: Any time you work with people, you need to recognize where they start. And so we always remind people that, in this moment, construction and building unions have almost 30 percent unemployment. They have democratically elected officials, and they're trying to figure out how to get their members to work, because that's what they are good at and because they believe in it. The really practical challenge for us as a movement is to understand where people come from and to try to make that okay and then help them be successful. In San Jose, we've done that by recognizing that local people want to have an opportunity to have quality jobs, which means union jobs. As a person of color and a woman I see the best route out of poverty is to be a member of a union.

I just sat in a room full of [people from] national women's organizations who were all saying that the unions offer the best way for women to move out of poverty and stay out. It's the same thing for people of color. We have to recognize that we need to be able to meet each others' needs and help each other.

For example, in the East Side Union High School District, as they were building, we created a program to help move kids in a predominantly Latino school district into apprenticeship programs. They got to work in their school, but they also got the chance to find permanent jobs. And whether people are undocumented, or just out of work, or in commu-

nities that are struggling, everyone wants to figure out how to get a quality job. We have to figure out how to meet those needs and not see them as competing interests. So I actually think it's a challenge that our movement hasn't risen to at this point.

Clarke: Can you talk about some of the successful examples of building cross-constituency coalitions?

Kidd: I agree with the point about the rhetoric of the Human Rights Declaration being really difficult. I come from Canada where we have a different social contract. But in my experience, campaigns or struggles around rights—whether it's the right to water in Bolivia or the right to education for the girl child in India or union rights in Colombia—concrete campaigns for real people have always been really inspiring and motivating. And those kinds of intersections are really important to encourage.

In the last year, I've been working on the Raising Our Voices program in East Oakland. We had a group of people from different social justice organizations, from different immigrant communities. Whether it

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Photo:
Nepalese women learn
to be trekking guides
with the program
Empowering Women of
Nepal.

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Gianturco. From the
book *Women Who
Light the Dark* courtesy
of Global Fund for
Women

Global Fund for Women

At the Global Fund, we don't do direct organizing within the United States, but we are the largest women's fund that supports women's rights by organizing and mobilizing. In our 21 years, we've worked in about 167 countries. So, in a way, we are just the opposite of Adam Krueggel, who talked about Contra Costa County being a microcosm of the world.

We work in the world and we're trying

to see how building local connections can help us further our own agenda in terms of really being able to promote and protect the rights of women overseas.

The focus of our work is building women's agency, getting their voices to decision-making in all areas of society, and realizing that women face multiple discrimination from class, caste, poverty, culture, and social factors. And those of us who work with immigrant and migrant commu-

nities in this country know that such discrimination carries over from the countries of origin.

The linkages are very strong and clear. We look at ways we can work with organizations that are addressing how international development aid is deployed from this country, to make sure that it really takes the concerns of women into account.

—Shalini Nataraj, Vice President
of Programs

was from Central America or Mongolia or from the Caribbean, the sharing of experiences around how they've made their own campaigns, and of their personal life stories, was probably the most significant learning experience. I think communications are key to all of this. One of the most important things that *Race, Poverty and the Environment* can provide, and communicators can provide, is that opportunity for people to intersect and find out about struggles in other places.

Nataraj: Increasingly, in organizing overseas, those linkages are being made between environmental, social justice, human rights, and women's rights movements. As we all know, there are very disparate agendas within the women's rights movements. One of the things that I think helps in promoting a funding agenda is to look at opportunities that can really catalyze those linkages. There are also different approaches overseas that can be used here more effectively. One is the notion of class action suits. Now that isn't very widely used here in the United States, but actually bringing suits under international law to promote things, such as the right to housing or the right to healthcare, would be a very strong organizing tool.

Clarke: How do you see moving forward with human rights organizing in your work?

Kruggel: This is an important time in history to be doing this kind of work. Some of the work done by our sister organizations in Rwanda and in El Salvador has allowed us to see how people, in the most marginal and desperate conditions, have been able to reclaim a spir-



it and sense of dignity and truly organize around basic human rights. People in our country need to learn from this quickly.

We've had a tremendous experience over the last year in building alliances across different arenas with labor, educators, and healthcare providers, between immigrants and non-immigrants. We're standing on the edge of an abyss, but we also have a tremendous opportunity to make a lot of these linkages. Our organization just had a big action last night in Antioch, California. We had Tongan and Latino and African-American students from the high school and from the community all working together on a comprehensive agenda for reforming the high school system so that kids can get access to apprenticeship programs, and eventually land living wage jobs and gain access to decent housing. We were also able to link it to a new form of transit-oriented development. We had the Central Labor Council supporting it. This is a catalytic moment where we have the opportunity to dramatically transform their way of living so we can save the planet and really save each other. ■

Photo:
Media Alliance trains emerging journalists in East Oakland.

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Media Alliance

Media Alliance is about 30 years old. In the last 10 years, as media and technology have been available more inexpensively, our emphasis has gone from working with the professional gatekeepers to working with social justice organizations to teach media and communication skills so they can represent themselves. Broadly speaking, we utilize a communication rights framework that supports both people's

right to represent themselves in media and their right to receive quality information.

Recently, we've been involved in two campaigns. One is a media training program in East Oakland called Raising Our Voices conducted with leaders of community organizations. Areas of concern have been on attacks on immigrants, violence concerning youth, and lack of quality education in the Oakland schools.

The second is to build a more equitable

communications system. For example, the federal government is directing stimulus money toward increasing internet broadband access. Working in coalition with the media justice network (MAGNET) and also the Media and Democracy Coalition, we are trying to ensure that the stimulus money actually goes to organizations redeveloping their own community's communications infrastructure.

—Dorothy Kidd, Co-Chair of MA