

Forum: Youth Assembly - Action Paper I

Issue: The importance of Activism

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INTRODUCTION

Activism is one of the only ways people can protest injustices and fight for political or social change. Whether it is through campaigns, protests or political advocacy, activism is the result of the action taken by people, especially members of marginalized communities, for political and social change. Activism is the reason why some of the most known forms of systematic oppression like slavery and the apartheid no longer exist.

Throughout history, activists like Nelson Mandela and Malala Yousafzai, among others have been persecuted, threatened and on many occasions killed and while that might seem like a reason to stop fighting against the injustices of the world, it has the opposite effect with more people joining movements that they believe in. Journalists, human rights defenders and grassroots movement leaders that have died are precisely the reason why activism is important for the world, seeing as they have dedicated their lives to promoting peace and a path to a better world without violence and hate.

Without activism and activists to stand up against injustices, the world today wouldn't be as we know it. Thus, it is now more important than ever to continue to engage in activism and contribute to the creation of a freer and more equal world by ensuring that no one that has their rights violated is afraid to speak up.

With the world changing constantly, activism has had to adapt to our new modern way of living, reaching a global audience through means such as internet platforms. While it is possible that misinformation about causes and performative activism can occur, there are many benefits that social media can offer to activism. Social media can amplify the voices of marginalized peoples and help spread awareness quickly on problems that a person might not have learned from mass information outlets, such as the news. Moreover, social media campaigns can help with crowdfunding and providing legal and financial aid, ensuring that activists have the resources they need to continue campaigning.

DEFINITION OF KEY-TERMS

Activism

“The use of direct and noticeable action to achieve a result, usually a political or social one”¹

¹ *Activism | English Meaning - Cambridge Dictionary*,
https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/activism#google_vignette. Accessed July 2024.

Apartheid

System of legalized racial discrimination in South Africa ²

Grassroot leaders

Unofficial leaders of a community or an organization that focus on the issues that impact their community

Dalit movement

Movement that seeks equality and fights against the discrimination that the Dalits face due to the caste system in India³

Enforced disappearances

Cases in which people are detained without following a detention procedure in accordance with international and national laws on the matter and their fate is unknown.

Performative activism

“Activism done to increase one’s capita rather than because of one’s devotion to a cause”⁴

“Slacktivism”

“The practice of conspicuously showing support for a cause without taking any real steps to effect change”⁵

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The history of activism

While there is no record of the first person who used the term “activism”, the term started becoming more popular in the early 1920’s to describe campaigning for social and political change. Activism movements began as a response to the systematic oppression people, mostly minorities, went through. One of the earliest recorded cases of activism is the Peasants Revolt in 1381, which was started to protest the excessive taxation. The movement itself did not achieve its goals but it demonstrated the people’s ability to organize themselves for a cause and how to demand change.

² “Apartheid.” *Legal Information Institute*, www.law.cornell.edu/wex/apartheid#:~:text=Apartheid%20was%20conceptualized%20in%20South,areas%20prohibited%20to%20Black%20people . Accessed July 2024.

³ “Dalit Movement.” *Unacademy*, Feb. 2024, <https://unacademy.com/content/upsc/study-material/sociology/dalit-movement/>. Accessed 18 July 2024.

⁴ “Performative Activism.” *Boston Medical Center*, [www.bmc.org/glossary-culture-transformation/performative-activism#:~:text=Defined%20as%20activism%20that%20is,sexist%2C%20homophobic%2C%20et.c.\)](http://www.bmc.org/glossary-culture-transformation/performative-activism#:~:text=Defined%20as%20activism%20that%20is,sexist%2C%20homophobic%2C%20et.c.)) . Accessed July 2024.

⁵ “Slacktivism Definition & Meaning.” *Merriam-Webster*, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/slacktivism. Accessed July 2024.

Activism in the 20th century

The 20th century marked a sort of revolution for new technologies, thus impacting activism in so many ways. The television had a huge effect on activism since it documented injustices like segregation and it educated people on social issues and the movements created to combat them. Additionally, the radio played a significant role in coordinating movements and spreading messages of civil disobedience. During the military dictatorship in Greece, radios were used to mobilize people to join the movement against the junta and organize protests.

Activism in the 21st century

Activism in the 21st century has had to adapt to the surge of social media. This has helped activists spread awareness on many critical issues and raise funds for the causes. While the platforms have many advantages for activism, there has been a rise in slacktivism, leading to the easier spread of misinformation, which causes campaigns to lose their credibility. Moreover, sharing information about an issue can help a cause reach a wider audience but it doesn't encourage people to act and help reach the goals of the movement.

Types of activism

Protests

Protests are considered one of the most common ways for civilians to express their disagreement to an injustice. Protests are based on raising awareness and demanding change. Many steps need to be taken to organize a protest but, with support from organizations and individuals, as well as a set of clear goals, they can be successful. There are peaceful protests and, in some cases, violent ones, with the former being more successful in their goals than the latter. According to a study conducted by Erica Chenoweth and Evan Perkoski, nonviolent protests succeed 53% more than violent protests.⁶

⁶ "Violence v Non Violence: Which Is More Effective as a Driver of Change?" *From Poverty to Power*, 12 June 2018, <https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/give-peace-a-chance-because-violent-change-doesnt-have-one/> . Accessed July 2024.



Figure 1: Mothers of Plaza de Mayo protesting enforced disappearances ⁷

Online Campaigns

Online Campaigns are one of the most recent forms of activism. They allow people and organizations from all over the world to amplify their causes. Through these campaigns, people can learn more about the topic with the speed of information that the media provides. When they are successful, online campaigns can get the people involved to fix the problem, either through internal restructures, in the case of companies, or amendments in legislature, in the case of nations. That is why it is important to ensure that misinformation doesn't happen due to the rapid distribution of information.

Art

Before the creation of the internet and social media, literature and paintings were one of the ways used to spread a message. Activists at the time were using these instruments to inspire change and to get more people to join their causes. Some notable examples are Harriet Beecher Stowe's book called Uncle Tom's Cabin which had anti-slavery messages and Picasso, whose work, like the Guernica, had an anti-war message.

Impact of activism

Activism can have a significant impact on social, economic, and political issues. For example, labor related movements have managed to increase the workers' wages and their working conditions. Furthermore, minorities' voices are boosted which can lead to a better understanding of their problems and equality for everyone regardless of background or gender.

⁷ Abierta, NAN y Memoria. "The International Press and the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo." *Papelitos*, <https://papelitos.com.ar/nota/la-prensa-internacional-y-las-madres-de-plaza-de-mayo> . Accessed July 2024.

Additionally, activism can lead to the creation of new laws and debates which are an important step towards change.

Examples of movements

Montgomery Bus Boycott

The Montgomery Bus Boycott is considered one of the most significant civil rights movements in the United States of America. In the mid-20th century, city ordinance laws in many areas of the US forced black people to sit in the designated sections specifically for black people give their seats up in the case that the bus was full. On March 2, 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama, 15-year-old Claudette Colvin was arrested for refusing to give up her seat for another passenger and violating the aforementioned law.

The most famous example of such protest was on December 1, 1955, when Rosa Parks, a 42-year-old secretary for the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) which was an organisation that focused on political and educational equality for minority groups, was arrested for refusing to give her seat to another passenger. Her actions started the Montgomery Bus Boycott, inspiring activists like Martin Luther King to fight against discrimination. One year later, the U.S Supreme Court ordered the desegregation of the buses. This impacted the citizens lives positively as the easier access to transport allowed more black citizens could find work and get education.

Black Lives Matter

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) Movement is considered one of the most significant social movements of the 21st century. It was established by three activists shortly after the murder of Trayvon Benjamin Martin, a 17-year-old black boy who was visiting his father at Twin Lakes.

The movement has become the epicentre of discussion, following the death of an African American man, named George Floyd, by a police officer on May 25, 2020. BLM has helped bring awareness to police brutality, systemic oppression and the racial injustices that black people face. Moreover, the movement has influenced legislations and reforms like the reallocation of police funds to other community programs in States such as Oregon and California with the goal of achieving accountability for law enforcement and reducing police violence.



Figure 2: Protestors are at Black Lives Matter demonstration⁸

MAJOR COUNTRIES AND ORGANIZATIONS INVOLVED

Amnesty International

Amnesty International is a non-governmental organization founded in 1961 in the United Kingdom that campaigns against the violation of human rights and violence while also supporting numerous campaigns, such as the movement against enforced disappearances. The organization's most significant accomplishments include helping create the Arms Trade Treaty in 2014 that has been ratified by 113 states and the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (commonly known as the United Nations Convention Against Torture (UNCAT) which currently has 174 member states.

Green Peace

Since its founding in 1971, Green Peace has worked on investigating the causes of environmental problems and finding solutions with the help of donors and foundations that are keen on promoting a sustainable way of living. Green Peace has accomplished many of their goals through advocacy, such as influencing one of the most famous internet companies in Korea to use renewable energy, campaigning against destructive fishing practices, which resulted in ending the use of deadly drift nets, and, most importantly, negotiating with governments all over the world for the establishment of marine sanctuaries and prevention of pollution.

⁸ "Black Lives Matter." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 3 July 2024, www.britannica.com/topic/Black-Lives-Matter. Accessed July 2024.

United States of America (USA)

The USA is the founding home of many movements that have had a global effect over the past century. The most known and recent forms of activism range from anti-racism movements, such as the “Black Lives Matter”, and “Stop Asian Hate” to labor related movements like the Writers Guild of America and SAG-AFTRA Strike. Despite the numerous positive effects of these movements, it is important to note that more than 250,000 civilians get injured during such protests, property is damaged, and movements are being alienated.⁹

India

From 1857 until 1947 India advocated for its independence from the British colonial rule. The most prominent activist for India’s independence was Mahatma Gandhi, a man who dedicated himself to fighting for social justice in India through non-violent movements and civil disobedience. India’s activism movements led by Gandhi influenced activists worldwide, such as Martin Luther King.

While fighting for India’s independence, other movements were also founded to combat injustices in the class-based caste system of the British Raj, such as the Dalit movement which was started by Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar. Over the last century, there has been many efforts to protect the rights of the Dalits and bring awareness to their struggles like the creation of the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR).

South Africa

South African nationals have faced many hardships during the apartheid regime that was started in 1948 by the Nationalist Political Party, due to its oppressive and racially segregated policies. The most prominent figure in the movement against the apartheid system, Nelson Mandela, was the son of the Madiba clan’s Chief who became a lawyer and in 1952 made the first black law practice in South Africa with Oliver Tambo.

From 1944 to 1990, Mandela and other activists like Ruth First and Joe Slovo advocated for the end of Apartheid, a system of racial segregation, with the deaths of activists fueling the movement by drawing attention to it internationally. The end of the apartheid system allowed economic growth and most importantly the creation of a democratic government.

France

France has a long history of activism, dating back to the 18th century with the French Revolution. The French revolution was one of the most pivotal social change movements in France, inspiring countries all over the world to fight for change in their countries. In recent times, the May 68 protests, which began as a student riot, amassed more than 10 million people to join the movement which focused on many social and labor issues.

Sweden

⁹ “U.S. Data on Police Shootings and Violence.” *U.S. Data on Police Shootings and Violence | Law Enforcement Epidemiology Project | University of Illinois Chicago*,

Sweden is regarded as one of the countries that has a long history of environmental movements with the most recent and youth-led one being the Fridays for Future movement. On August 20, 2018, the 15-year-old founder of Fridays for Future, Greta Thunberg, sat in front of the Swedish Parliament with other activists of her age to protest the climate crisis and to encourage the Swedish Parliament to find a way to combat it. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the movement has had to adapt to the changes in lifestyle and instead aim for reaching a global audience through social media.

Argentina

During the military dictatorship that took place in Argentina from 1976 to 1983, journalists and human rights activists campaigned against the enforced “disappearances” which covered the murders of political opponents, influencing other countries like Chile and Bolivia to fight against political oppression, which limited freedom of speech under the threat of harm to both the protesters and their families.

The most famous movement is the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, a human rights movement, started by the families of the victims and activists, that aimed to spread awareness about the enforced disappearances through protests and get justice for the people that died because of the disappearances.

TIMELINE OF EVENTS

DATE	DESCRIPTION OF EVENT
14 August 1947	End of the British colonial rule in India after 200 years of campaigning against this act of colonialism.
21 December 1956	The U.S Supreme Court ruling ends the segregation of buses in Montgomery and orders their desegregation.
30 April 1977	Establishment of the “Mothers of Plaza de Mayo” movement outside the Federal Government office.
10 May 1994	End of the apartheid regime and the start of Nelson Mandela’s presidency
4 September 1995	The fourth World Conference on Women created by the United Nations took place in Beijing in September for two weeks

16 December 1996	Adoption of the “International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights”
9 December 1998	Adoption of the “Declaration on Human Rights Defenders”
24 December 2014	The Arms Trade Treaty is placed into effect.
12 December 2015	Adoption of the “Paris Agreement” by 196 parties at the UN Climate Change Conference in Paris

RELEVANT UN RESOLUTIONS, TREATIES AND EVENTS

Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (A/RES/53/144)

The Declaration aimed to reaffirm the need to protect human rights defenders and to support their work. It was adopted on 9 December 1998 with its main focus being the protection of the fundamental human rights and the right to protest against any human rights injustices. The resolution further highlights the rights of human rights defenders.

Furthermore, the Declaration emphasized the need to create the policies necessary for the protection of human rights defenders and institutions that would focus legal support and assistance in emergencies. Many laws and protection mechanisms were created to ensure human rights defenders in countries such as Colombia and Mexico.

Beijing World Conference on Women: Action for Equality, Development and Peace

The Fourth World Conference on Women took place in Beijing in 1995. It raised awareness on women’s struggles and how to ensure women’s equality to men in the workplace and ways to stop discrimination. There were 12 key areas that the conference focused on such as women’s education. The discussions that took place in the conference led to the creation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. This conference pushed member states to create laws that protected women against violence in the workplace and other institutions. While violence against women as shown by statistics is still a major problem all over the world, this conference made many important steps for equality and the protection of victims. The conference’s importance is highlighted by the 30,000 activists that participated in the conference.

World Conference on Education for All

Held in Thailand in 1990, the conference aimed to ensure education for all and making sure the system would be effective for everyone. Activists, Non-Governmental Organizations

(NGO's) and delegates from 155 countries participated in the conference in order to achieve this goal. The conference allowed activists and organizations to create programs tailored to their causes and needs. Activists were provided with the necessary resources to fund the aforementioned programs.

PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS TO SOLVE THE ISSUE

Kyoto Protocol

The Kyoto Protocol was an international treaty signed on 11 December 1997 by 84 states and in 2001 with more than 180 member states. Its main goals were to reduce the 5 greenhouse gas emissions that were more responsible for climate change. Planting trees and providing the infrastructure necessary for Less Economically Developed Countries were among the measures that were considered to achieve the goals outlined in the Protocol. While the Kyoto Protocol ultimately did not achieve its desired results, it was an important stepping stone for later measures, such as the Paris Agreement, the most recent international treaty on climate change.

Paris Agreement

The Paris Agreement was adopted during the conference of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change that envisioned the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. It has been signed by 195 states and postdates the Kyoto Protocol.

The Paris Agreement is working on mitigating the consequences of climate change, while also providing the necessary funding for Less Economically Developed Countries to achieve the goals of the Agreement, through the Global Environment Facility (GEF), the Least Developed Countries Fund (LCDF) and the Special Climate Change Fund (SCCF) which are aided by the World Bank.

Istanbul Protocol

The Istanbul Protocol was developed to protect individuals from torture through the documentation of cases and to punish the perpetrators in 1999. Before its creation, medical evidence was not held credible as much in court, which affected the verdict of the cases. The manual has helped educate physicians on how to document torture and it has helped the states implement the protocol.

With the help of NGOs, such as the Physicians for Human Rights and Redress, the protocol was updated in 2022 to ensure it remains effective, keeping the changes in the medical, human rights and legal field in mind. Moreover, the protocol helps human rights activists with better documentation for legal cases.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Education and Awareness on types of protest and social impact

One of the key ways that activists have managed to bring attention to an issue in order to solve it is through the public's awareness through measures, such as marches and petitions.

However, the public, who are often not fully aware of the issues they are campaigning against, may not be able to find effective solutions. By educating people on protests, they will be able to raise their concerns over wrongdoings and cause change using the method best suited for the specific issue.

Raising funds

Raising money for a cause will help the activists as protests and movements require funding. Seeing as movements require research, educational programs and legal representation, those who organise the movements have employees that are dedicated to researching, tracking any changes in programs and treaties that have been created to help solve the issue, making funding necessary for a movement to succeed. The funding process would be aided by both individuals, through crowdfunding, as well as institutions, who would provide grants or other types of financial aid.

“Artivism”

Artistic activism is one of the ways activists can spread powerful messages safely with low possibility of arrest or censorship. It mobilizes people to act, and it forces people to face the issues at hand. Since the late 1990s, people have used creative outlets to raise awareness on crucial issues of their time. Some of the most famous artistic activists are Banksy who through his street art has spread antiwar messages and Ai Weiwei, who uses sculptures to highlight human rights issues. Their work has inspired and influenced people all over the world to fight against these issues. Unfortunately, this form of activism is not immune to censorship, as officials can cite vandalism to arrest activists.

Digital Activism

Networking on social media has proven to be an effective way for young activists to support causes nowadays. By creating a hashtag that will be affiliated to a movement, spreading the message of the movement, and increasing the support for the cause can become more effective and easier to do. Digital activism can help reach activists all over the world, which can result in collaborations between movements and activists.

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