

Learning activity

Situating ourselves in the social movement landscape

TIME: 90 mins

LEARNING AIMS:

- Understand the broader landscape of social movements and communities in struggle.
- Reflect on how one's own organization is located in in the wider landscape of social movements and communities in struggle
- Identify key movements and communities relevant to one's activist work and how others might relate to us
- Assess strengths, weaknesses, potential, and risks of one's own movement in the eyes of potential allies.

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS: 5-20

PREPARATION AND MATERIALS: Write text

FRAMING:

This learning activity promotes critical reflection, strategic thinking, and self-awareness within the context of social movements. It is a four-stage activity, but you don't have to get through all four stages for it to be useful. It is fundamentally about locating ourselves in the wider landscape of social movements and communities in struggle in a way that can help us see how others might relate to us.

It can be done very usefully with a small group of other people from your own organisation – even if they are not doing the course! – or on your own as a solo reflection. Either way it will be more effective if you write it down or draw out the results on a sheet of paper so you can visualise it in some sense.

FACILITATION:

Step 1. Introduction

Step 2. What is in your movement landscape?

Decide how big a picture is useful for your activist work – e.g. European, state-level, region, city, something else. Within that geographical space, what are the key movements and communities in struggle that exist?

This might be quite a big question so you can break it down to think about it. E.g. for movements you might want to do a grid of some kind, maybe with broadly progressive movements to the left and broadly regressive ones to the right, strongly institutionalised ones on top and strongly autonomous ones on the bottom. Or something else – this isn't a map of reality, just a way to think about what other movements are actually present!

For communities in struggle (social groups where a significant proportion of people are actively in conflict with the wider society) you can use a checklist: e.g. which minority ethnic/racial groups are broadly in struggle? Which exploited classes? Which gender / sexuality-defined groups etc.? Here

and with movements it's not about where you think there should be activism and organising, but where it's actually happening.

Between these you should wind up with a reasonable number of movements and communities in struggle – if you don't, maybe you're expecting everyone else's movements to look like yours. Take out the movements that are very definitely your opponents (e.g. the far right) and see what you're left with.

Step 3. Mapping your movement landscape

Draw a circle and see if you can place those different movements around it so that a movement or community in struggle is close to the others it tends to work together with. (They don't all have to be on the edge of the circle – if a movement is well connected it may be easier to put this closer to the centre.)

Ask yourself a few questions about the result:

- Do you see very separate “sectors” that don't talk to each other, or is it more of a spectrum? (I.e. is there a culture of making wider alliances or a culture of competing for funding, political access, media coverage etc.?)
- Where there are interactions and alliances, does it seem to be mostly defined by issues overlapping, by who is involved (class, race, gender etc.) or by something else?
- Is there a difference between how movements work here and communities in struggle?
- How often do you find yourself thinking “I don't actually know” and how often is the answer familiar?

Step 4. Explaining ourselves to others

Thinking about this “map”, how would you describe your own movement (or part of a movement) to people in other movements and communities in struggle? Where would you put it on the map and why? What would you tell them about how you work?

Step 5. Seeing ourselves as others see us

Lastly, if others were thinking about working together with us what might they think about our...

- Strengths?
- Weaknesses?
- Future potential?
- Risks / problems?

Are there things we could do to become more credible as future allies?

Conclusion and take aways

Gather participants' key takeaways and insights from from the exercise.

Conclude by emphasising that social movement landscape is diverse and complex, encompassing various movements and communities in struggle. Analyzing the landscape helps in understanding the relationships, interactions, and potential alliances between different movements and communities. Being aware of one's position within this landscape is crucial for effective activism and collaboration.

SOURCE: Laurence Cox