

Dignity Rights Project Inaugural Workshop 12 May 2017

Closing Remarks and Ways Forward

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A common language

- Despite all our differences (5 continents and 17 time zones), perspectives and experiences, it is clear that we share a common dignity language. There is also a clear sense that we are not working with a single, hard definition of dignity and that it is wise not to seek to crystallise it. At this starting point, our understanding of dignity includes several elements.
- Dignity is about recognition and promotion/protection of identities of those on the margin of society and on the periphery of (constitutional) law, e.g. indigenous people, prisoners, the poor, and we want to reach out to them. Dignity is anchored in a sense of (in)justice understood in rich (and novel) ways, e.g. social, territorial, environmental justice. Dignity is not just about life, but a certain quality of life.
- The Dignity Rights Project seeks to make these voices heard and these injustices visible so that they can be addressed. It further seeks to make changes in law, policy, even in small day-to-day ways of doing things. Dignity is actionable through all sorts of channels that we will have to explore as well as create.
- Together we aim to bring answers to dignity issues, perhaps answers to each other for a start, and to share information, resources and experience. But we are also bringing questions to the Project, and those questions are as important as the answers (that we think we have at this stage).

Resources to draw from and avenues to explore

- As dignity is clearly an actionable concept and, as we start with a very broad understanding of dignity, many resources are available to us and many avenues are open to us (some of which we might have to open ourselves).
- Quite obviously we can draw on standard law resources (e.g. international, regional, domestic law, constitutional law, criminal law, and a combination thereof). Moreover, a key strength that we have as a group is the ability to draw on real life 'dignity stories' to inform our understanding and definitions of dignity, and as well to create a space for these voices and stories to be heard.
- We can also explore all sorts of avenues: as dignity is actionable in court (on its own or combined with other rights), so judicial litigation is possible. But litigation is not the only way forward, and might not be necessarily the most effective way. Other arenas are also open, such as mediation, arbitration, and policy changes.

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- In terms of positioning, we are not acting in any kind of pre-defined legal or political framework, be it within national boundaries or at the international level, and we are likely to find ourselves at a crossroads, where we will be able to draw from and combine a range of resources that might not otherwise necessarily be brought together.

Difficulties and obstacles

- Three main issues have come up in the discussion today and we need to be aware of these difficulties and prepared to face them.
- As the concept is still new in many parts of the world and in many legal systems, using it as we intend to do will almost inevitably raise issues of fit with the more established ways of doing things and thinking about rights and justice. We can anticipate distrust, clashes, opposition, resistance, as what will be increasingly familiar and obvious to us might not be for those facing us (whether on a partnership basis or as an opponent).
- In particular, it is safe to anticipate some degree of sceptical reaction and negative responses when we will overlap with religious agendas or territories, because the concept of dignity is about acknowledging and promoting a particular image of human beings with their full range of freedoms and aspirations, and in their complex interactions with time, space, fellow human beings and themselves. Moreover, while we are not defining ourselves as an anti-capitalist movement, the Dignity Rights Project comes up against injustices that are generated by global capitalism, which is no small adversary to be facing.
- Finally, while we think of it and want to use it in very positive - i.e. liberal, democratic, and humanist - ways, it has to be borne in mind that dignity can be a dangerous concept, and that, put in the wrong hands (e.g. dictators/oppressors love dignity too) or ambiguously defined, it could well be used in very destructive ways, as dignity has to do not just with who/how we are individually, but with a much broader sense of humanity, identity and power relationships.

Our mission

- The Dignity Rights Project is about education, advocacy and litigation. What the inaugural workshop has confirmed is that it is also about constructing robust, meaningful and user-friendly definitions for dignity as a right and a tool for protecting humanity and promoting justice. In this process we will have to negotiate a tension between constructing a clear concept of dignity so that we can use it as an effective tool on the one hand, and keeping dignity open to a range of meanings and developments on the other. We will have to test, and take stock of, our definition(s) and uses of dignity and monitor their developments; moreover we will need to discuss boundaries and, as the case may be, exclude issues as being irrelevant to the Dignity Rights Project. Finally, human dignity, if it is to make a difference, has to be approached and constructed in a novel manner. This will require us to think in very new ways and, while this may challenge some of our deeper ways of working and thinking, this is also a very exciting part of the adventure.

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