**Amnesty West Midlands Conference Report *Global Rights – Local Action: Human Rights are OUR Rights* Saturday, 11 January 2020 *Aston University, Birmingham***

**SECTION A: CIRCULAR FROM AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL UK** (Emphasis is AIUKs)

**Pilot Launch: BUILDING THE IMPACT OF THE MOVEMENT – PEOPLE POWER**

AIUK wants to create

* a **more vibrant, visible and diverse Amnesty movement** in the UK to campaign for human rights at home and abroad
* a movement that is **more visible and relevant to everyone in the UK**, and more effective in achieving human rights change
* **activists having more influence and opportunity** to shape the strategic direction of Amnesty International UK

To do this, AIUK will

* **pilot** new initiatives quickly, on a small scale, so that we can learn as we go and adapt our activities (this event is the first)
* build the **power of activists**
* create a **more effective organising structure** at the local level
* change the roles and structures of our activist networks, to **make it easier to participate in our movement**
* **work more closely with communities in the UK**: developing more partnerships, campaigning and activities at local level
* change our culture and practice to **enable activists and rights holders** to initiate, develop and lead campaigns
* ensure that Amnesty activists can **communicate effectively with each other**, in the UK and globally

**SECTION B: CONFERENCE NOTES**

**Aims of the day:** Focus is the ‘impact of the movement’

- to explore the possibilities for increased activism and activism support.

- to bring more people into working with, and for, AI in the region. We should be ‘breaking down the silos’ and work more with local groups who are supportive of human rights eg. football clubs.

**Breaking down the Silos: Imtiaz Choonara (Derby AI)** gave an account of the activity that his local group had undertaken in cooperation with other local groups (silos). A Derby Peace Week was organised which consisted of different events across several venues (eg. multi-faith centres) and involved several non-political groups. Activities included workshops (eg. *What does peace mean to you?)*, cinema, performance art and football matches. Simple slogans were used to engage the public, such as *Build Homes Not Bombs* and *Welcome Refugees*. The group also ‘tagged on’ to events that were already running in the community. Leaflets were produced and distributed. Many civic organisations were eager to be involved. The first Peace Week was in April 2017 and this has now become an established annual event in Derby.

**How local groups can support refugees and asylum seekers in their area: Colleen Molloy from *Birmingham City of* *Sanctuary*, Irene Austin from *Herts. Welcomes Refugees*, Sue Wolfendale from *Malvern Welcomes* and Ian Myson (South Midlands Area Representative)** led a presentation on the activities of **RESTORE**: Birmingham Churches Supporting Refugees. RESTORE welcomes refugees and asylum seekers and helps to get them settled through 1:1 befriending. They work to the UN definition of refugees *Who is a Refugee?* RESTORE’s vision is to build a society where refugees and asylum seekers are welcomed, integrated and valued.

Asylum seeker’ is a western construct, in use in the UK from 1951. 70.8m people are displaced worldwide. In the UK, 29,380 people claimed asylum in 2018 and 34,354 people did so between 1 October 2018 and 30 September 2019 - a positive trend. The Home Office is making asylum seekers wait longer for a resolution of their claim. 5,026 people are currently receiving Section 95 Asylum Support in the wider West Midlands. In 2018, 33% of asylum seekers given Leave to Remain. Many asylum seekers have their application refused, however, 38% of these are reversed on appeal and Leave to Remain is granted. To date, 20,000 Syrian refugees have been resettled in the UK through the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (SVPRS) BUT these are classed as asylum seekers. Also, the Global Resettlement Scheme has a target of 5,000 WIC (Women, Infants and Children) for resettlement through Community Sponsorship Schemes.

Local groups wishing to mount actions relating to AI’s *Refugees Welcome* campaign could partner with Coventry or Birmingham City of Sanctuary, could mount a *Lift the Ban* campaign to allow asylum seekers the right to work, develop on-going activism on immigration, housing and benefits with other organisations (eg. English language classes, support for the destitute). Please link with local refugee groups to maximise awareness and impact.

**Impact of the AI Movement: Kerry Muscogiuri (Campaigns Director, AIUK)** showed a PowerPoint presentation to the conference which outlined AIUK’s strategy for *Building the Impact of the Movement*. Emphasised that the strategy was about using people power to make change – Amnesty needs more people power to meet future human rights challenges, based on Peter Benenson’s *Call to Action*. BUT, more of the same won’t get the amount of people power that’s needed. What Amnesty does now is great, but it (we) wants to do better.

1. AIUK lacks diversity in its membership; our brand is ageing, we have among the oldest supporters in all of the NGOs.
2. Politicians are becoming more resistant to traditional methods of campaigning.
3. We need to change how we ‘do’ activism. Lead activists are asking for more Empowerment and Connectivity (ie. learning from academia, grass-roots community organisations).
4. We already do lots of MOBILISING, now we need just as much ORGANISING. We need to build leadership and develop leaders who can engage others, distribute responsibility and use new technology (eg. NationBuilder) to help activist groups organise more effectively online.
5. Activist roles, training and campaigning methods will change. A new curriculum has been developed for Community Organising training and a Regional Team Model is being developed.
6. Local presence and connections to communities will be strengthened. The target is to develop relevant local campaigns to help get the attention of local decision-makers, for example MPs, and funding will be available.
7. Diversity and new relationships will be prioritised to establish new networks to connect with under-represented groups, eg. faith communities, diaspora groups, LGBTI communities.

This is an ambitious strategy with many challenges to overcome. It will initiate radical change to how the organisation thinks and acts but it will be building on what AIUK already does, challenging the culture to support developing power. But we can do it! We have a brilliant and interactive network, both nationally and internationally.

**Trade, Commerce, Supply Chains and Human Rights (Workshop) *From big data to modern forms of slavery, why are companies at the heart of so many human rights abuses and what is Amnesty International doing about it?* Peter Frankental (Economic Affairs Programme Director, AIUK)** explained that Amnesty is looking at the regulatory environment as well as highlighting abuses and is committed to activists taking more ownership of the work. The range of impact is wide; companies have a lot to answer for, and public concern regarding the impact of corporate abuses is high. Amnesty is currently developing a global strategy on this. Our effective lobbying of states is dependent on an adequate understanding of economic factors and environment. Trade has implications for human rights and general abuses are lower working and food standards and abuses in supply chains, as well as concerns regarding poor environment. Current Trade Bill (Brexit) going through parliament allows the government to negotiate trade agreements without parliamentary scrutiny and also allows individual ministers to override the decisions of parliament, ie. change primary legislation.

AI’s main thrust is on the work of UK companies, for example:

* long-term work on the impact of Shell and BP on the Niger Delta
* abuses, particularly of women, on Twitter
* through the *Think Twice* campaign aimed at companies trading in the Palestinian Occupied Territories. The UK government is trying to legislate against the BDS (Boycott, Divest, Sanction) campaign. It argues that it is not for a public body to conduct foreign policy – AIUK is working with a QC on this. Any company engaging in trade with a foreign company that engages in human rights abuses is guilty of “grave human rights abuses” under the UK Equality Act. This legislation will be passed by the UK government – it was in the Queen’s Speech – and it will have a chilling effect on human rights work.
* in the Tech Sector. Facebook and Google is harvesting personal data and selling it on so AI is monitoring and taking action on this. Data mining can be used for political targeting, racial profiling, etc.
* refugees on Nauru, Australia
* *Ethical Batteries Initiative* that measures and monitors cobalt mining, ensuring ethical transition from oil to electric, for example, in the electronics and motor industries. 2/3rds of the world’s cobalt comes from the DRC, which uses child miners.

The starting point is establishing a research base. Also using the national and international law:

* *Modern Slavery Act* states that all companies who have above a certain number of employees (12,000 in the UK) must ensure that they are not using supply chains that have human rights abuses in them.
* *Mandatory Human Rights Diligence Act* contains guiding principles and its concept is recognised by the UN. UK government is committed to the principles but is not doing a great deal to ensure that they are being met. AIUK is pushing for a greater addressing of these principles in law by the UK government (eg. lowering of the company liability threshold) working with other political and civic groups.

Local groups can help and take action by disseminating information to local [politicians, local councils and the general public. Information and support can be accessed through the Business and Human Rights Resource Centre on the AIUK website, which also has examples of actions at local and national level, and additional information can be gained through the *Ethical Consumer* website. Look for a local, visible industry as a campaign focus – good to target business accreditation organisations – and link with other Midlands groups on this initiative.

**Keynote Address; Kate Allen (Director, AIUK)** addressed delegates regarding the strategic direction of Amnesty UK. She stated that big changes have already happened in the organisation’s history. 20 years ago, Amnesty made the decision to broaden its work, from simply supporting actions for Prisoners of Conscience, to include the whole spectrum of social and economic human rights abuses. Also giving activists - due to pressure from them –leave to canvass/act in the UK/host country.

We live in very challenging times, populist leaders have emerged across the world, posing a great threat to human rights. The result is, more people are taking to the streets and organising to challenge the way that some leaders g govern and the direction they wish to take their countries in, eg. France, Hong Kong, Lebanon. How can we (Amnesty activists) be a beacon for those people who want to find a place to put their effort? The Midlands are at the forefront of AIUK’s future work of forming regional teams. This is building on the work that local groups have been doing for many, many years. Many groups have forged strong links with local groups like football clubs, for example. These include Malvern, Reading, Leicester and Birmingham.

It hasn’t been an easy time for Amnesty International over the last few years. The International Secretariat has had a long, hard look at staff support and finances and Kumi Naidoo has made some excellent changes. It is sad that his health has deteriorated and he needs to stand down. The International Board is meeting this weekend to begin the search for a new Secretary General.

But we strive and thrive on our successes. Amnesty UKI won a key court case last June and exporting arms to Saudi Arabia is now unlawful. The government is appealing this decision but there are no exports at the moment. We have managed to secure the release of several Individuals at Risk (IARs) in Egypt and USA, for example, and AI researchers continue to carry out their invaluable work in Finland, Canada, Mexico and the Med. And we show our solidarity with people and their struggles, for example, Richard Radcliffe. We will continue our campaigns through 2020 – refugees and reuniting families, climate change, IARs and defending human rights defenders.

**Questions to Kate from delegates**

**Are we overstretched and lacking focus? (Welwyn)** AI worldwide is being called upon more, as conditions worsen in many countries. Your question will be discussed at our AGM as it is a very pertinent one. AI has a global plan and we need to be very definite about how we support this but Individuals at Risk will always be at the heart of what we do. We will never abandon this aspect – it is the important core of Amnesty International’s work.

**What about the website!? (Banbury)** There are two big drivers for our website – AI activists and the public. It’s vital that we ‘de-silo’ – make the connections and establish communication with other groups and we need to look at better ways of doing this.

**What about targeting non-state bodies? (East Midlands)** We are doing more work on this now, as there was an AGM resolution on this, but we need to see this as a global action.

**How can AIUK motivate individual members? (Individual member not in a local group)** We need to get better at this! It’s ok if people do not want to come to meetings, but that doesn’t mean that they do not wish to take action. We always need to be aware of grass roots thinking, concerns and wishes. Our movement is a democratic one and resolutions at the AGM must be supported and upheld.

**How will Amnesty work with/in view of the Johnson era?** Amnesty needs everyone who is a member or supporter as we move into the next few years and as events unfold. Links with MPs are vital. There would be a riot at International Board meetings if there was any suggestion to stop supporting IARs. It is not just AIUK that is resolute on this, all at international level are also.

Kate Allen’s emphases