

LOCAL GROUP LOCKDOWN LEARNINGS – ONE GROUP’S EXPERIENCE

Many Amnesty local groups have historically depended heavily on regular, face-to-face meetings as their operating model. So, lockdown came as a shock to the system. Banbury Group, like many, has responded by going online. This has involved improvising as we’ve gone along, with no one in the group being a “tech” expert. A quick account of what we’ve been up to may provide some stimulus or encouragement to other local groups in what is still an evolving situation. Our group hasn’t done anything that any other group could not do (so long as people have internet-connected computers/laptops/tablets).

On the eve of lockdown in March we had a virtual meeting (our first) with AIUK’s Individuals at Risk team about our wanting to take on one or more new cases to work on. This led to us adopting cases relating to Angolan pastoralists and a missing young Uighur man in China. The Angola case set up a further online briefing/discussion on the case in July with the relevant AI Country Coordinators for Angola and southern Africa.

We also decided that lockdown, with online communication clearly becoming more widely adopted, would be a good time to bite the bullet in getting individual Group members going with Twitter as a campaigning tool. We were conscious of anecdotal accounts that Twitter campaigning has been achieving greater “cut through” with foreign governments and officials particularly. The Group has its own reasonably well-followed Twitter account (with about 550 followers – a figure bigger than the number of AI National Members in our area, and so our biggest audience) but most of our individual members had not so far been active on Twitter. One of our group (the manager of our own Twitter account) delivered an introductory presentation, using some excellent slides borrowed from St Albans Group. This led to several of us becoming active on Twitter for Amnesty.

Another learning venture has been an online talk and discussion, which I led, about International Human Rights Law and Amnesty (which can be delivered to other groups). This non-technical talk, drawing on a course I have done, was intended to give people an overview of the international legal structure (UN, regional systems, domestic laws) which can be difficult to grasp in moving from one campaigning activity for Amnesty to another. This also brought out the centrality of economic, social and cultural rights to the international system.

We have also had a virtual meeting involving a Country Coordinator update on the human rights situation in Israel/OPT, one of the regional campaigns our Group has opted into.

Attendance at virtual meetings has been up on previous face-to-face meetings, with double figures each time rather than say 6 or 7. Other groups will know that even having an additional couple of people at meetings can make a world of difference. Online, we have also had much more interaction with the neighbouring Amnesty group in Chipping Norton. Some of their members have attended a couple of our online meetings, and vice versa. We have also reconnected with one or two people who hadn’t been able to attend previous face-to-face meetings for a while.

Have we had technical challenges? Yes: of course. It’s been a good idea to assume the first few minutes of any online meeting are spent getting everyone connected - not always straightforward. AIUK’s bar on using Zoom has been inconvenient but we’ve understood the security-risk rationale. We’ve experimented with Skype and Google Meet but the most reliable experience has been with Webex.

Online meetings put the onus (I believe) on a clear agenda and active chairing perhaps even more than in the case of face-to-face meetings. I would say more not less preparation is necessary for an

online meeting. With a group of ten or so I think virtual meetings also make attendees more visible, relative to one another, not least through the “wall of faces” on screen. I don’t think it’s a coincidence that it’s been during this period that we’ve moved to a better and more even distribution of the work between members of the group.

We’ve continued during lockdown to communicate with our MP (eg seeking engagement with Black Lives Matter) and with teacher contacts in local school groups – also with the local paper, for example over Covid-related inequalities. We’ve also started to consider how we’ll participate in the proposed Regional Festival in 2021. One thing we haven’t cracked yet is fund-raising online, beyond collecting voluntary individual group subscriptions. But I know that some groups have had successful online fundraising events eg quizzes, as well as group socials. And some fundraising activities such as sponsored outdoor activities are just as feasible under lockdown as otherwise.

Is the situation ideal? No. Was it ideal before lockdown? No. Are we making progress in developing the Group under lockdown in reach, skills and innovative ways of doing Amnesty’s vital work. I believe so.

We’re happy to share our learning with others – and hear about other Groups’ experiences. Please contact Ian Myson of Banbury Group (ian_myson@hotmail.com).

Ian Myson – August 2020