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## Rights in Small Places? Participation, Rights and Power in Northern Ireland

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# Going Against the Grain

University of Dayton Human Rights Center  
Social Practice of Human Rights Conference, Oct. 1-4, 2019

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## Rights in Small Places? Participation, Rights and Power in Northern Ireland

### Presented by:

**Nicola Browne**, *London School of Economics*

**Session:** Local Human Rights Movements

### Abstract:

This paper moves beyond the call for “rights to be made real in small places” and explores how it can be done.

That a disconnect exists between ordinary people and the world of human rights academia, NGOs and INGOs and the marginalised communities they are intended to serve is undisputed. As the years preceding and following the financial crash have been characterised by increased economic inequality and concentration of power and influence in the hands of a ever-shrinking coterie of elites, human rights as a tool of change have seemed increasingly legalistic, irrelevant and divorced from the people. A case study will be presented of Belfast based rights organisation (Participation and the Practice of Rights - PPR) set up to develop and test a model of how human rights can be used as tools by marginalised groups to define, campaign and implement international socio-economic rights standards in local settings. In 2013, PPR’s work was described by Mary Robinson as “the way in which human rights work should be, but isn’t, done.”

Placing rights holders at the heart of the struggle for economic, social and cultural rights in a meaningful way requires a number of conscious shifts of mindset and power - from the shape and modus operandi of our organisations, to who we consider as experts in human rights, to the manner in which we work to realise those rights. The paper will examine a participative human rights based approach methodology, co-produced with marginalised communities and used to deliver a range of successful grassroots campaigns on housing, mental health services and social security in Belfast between 2008-2018. It will share learning on the challenges, tensions and opportunities, and suggest ways in which participative community based rights work can be supported by funders, academics and advocates.

### Presenter information:

Nicola Browne, Atlantic Fellow for Social and Economic Equity, Fellow with Social Change Initiative: Nicola is a Belfast-based human rights lawyer and campaigner with experience across civil and political, and economic, social and cultural rights, and spanning work in an academic setting, an international body and an NGO. She was a founder staff member of internationally acclaimed organisation Participation and the Practice of Rights which pioneered a ground-

breaking participative HRBA for use by marginalised communities to realise their socio-economic rights, including a unique human rights indicators and benchmarks methodology. Nicola was selected as an Atlantic Fellow for Social and Economic Equity at the London School of Economics (cohort 2018/19) and also holds the role of Social Justice Fellow at Social Change Initiative focusing on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights movements and Peace-building.