

How the rights-based approach can help social work deliver social justice outcomes: Lessons from housing rights activism in Scotland

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Abstract

Drawing upon the findings of a qualitative case study of a housing rights community development project in Scotland, this article explores how a rights-based approach can help social work deliver social justice outcomes. Social work is often described as a 'human rights profession'. However, there remains a gap between how rights are enacted within individual-focused practice and structural change efforts. This gap stems from the persistent divide between bottom-up and top-down rights-based approaches in micro and macro social work practice. Study findings suggest that a bottom-up rights-based approach can help social workers achieve individual-level improvements while simultaneously advancing wider social change. To do so, social workers need to reposition themselves from 'the centre' to 'the side' when applying human rights frameworks. Only then, can the rights-based approach help revitalize social work's commitment to both individual well-being and social justice, particularly in contexts of increased participation, prevention, and early intervention.

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Introduction

Social work is commonly described as a ‘human rights profession’, with human rights principles embedded in definitions, codes of ethics, and practice (IFSW 2014; Mapp et al. 2019; McPherson and Abell 2020; Tarshish and Benish 2025). However, there is a critical tension in how rights are conceptualized (Howe 1991; Bell 2014; Garrett 2024). This tension manifests in the divide between top-down and bottom-up approaches to rights-based practice.

In top-down approaches, rights frameworks are commonly established without meaningful community involvement. Social workers are encouraged to use rights to guide their interventions, but decisions about which rights to claim, as established in legislative frameworks, have historically been made without including the perspectives of service users and communities (Uvin 2007; Ife 2009). A bottom-up approach, in contrast, ensures that legislation is informed by service users’ experiences and that rights actions are led by them (Hamm 2001; Ife 2016; European Network of National Human Rights Institutions 2022).

Although contemporary social work has made progress in incorporating communities’ perspectives into rights frameworks, it has been less successful in de-centring rights practice away from social workers. The profession has struggled to shift from a model where practitioners lead rights actions to one where the people they work with take the centre stage. This repositioning of social workers from ‘the centre’ to ‘the side’ represents a fundamental shift in how rights-based practice is implemented in community development settings.

This article draws upon the research findings of a qualitative case study of a housing rights community organization in Scotland to explore how a bottom-up rights-based approach can help social work enhance individual well-being (micro practice) and social justice (macro practice). The aim is to contribute to social work research and practice by expanding our understanding of how rights-based approaches work (Androff 2016; Staub-Bernasconi 2016; Reynaert et al. 2022; Garrett 2024). The article has four sections. The first section introduces key debates in rights-based social work. The second section locates the bottom-up rights-based approach within community development. The third section describes the research methodology. Finally, the fourth section discusses how social workers can better embrace a dual commitment to individual

well-being (micro practice) and social justice (macro practice) by employing a bottom-up rights-based approach that ‘de-centres’ their practice.

Human rights and social work

Rights-based approaches have played a fundamental role in advancing social work (Addams 1910; Cree 1995; Kemp and Brandwein 2010; Androff 2016; Staub-Bernasconi 2016; Gabel et al. 2022). Jane Addams (1860–1935) supported residents in housing, labour, and factory law reforms (Addams 1910). Ida B. Wells (1862–1931) campaigned against racism, for anti-lynching laws and wider social reform (McMurry 1998). Over time, countless actors have employed rights-based approaches to support people’s right to self-determination (Beresford and Croft 2004; Adams 2008; Ife et al. 2022), advocate for marginalized populations (Healy 2008; Adams et al. 2009a,b; Ferguson and Woodward 2009), and promote wider social change. Frameworks include radical social work (e.g. Bailey and Brake 1975; Fook 1993), structural social work (e.g. Mullaly and Dupré 2019), anti-racist social work (e.g. Tadam and Cane 2022; Jude et al. 2025), community development (e.g. Ife 1995), feminist social work (e.g. Kemp and Brandwein 2010), and anti-oppressive practice (e.g. Dominelli 1996).

History has also shown how a rights orientation is vulnerable to constraint and co-option, reflecting the complex relationship between social work and state policies (Reynaert et al. 2022; Carvalho and Albuquerque 2025). Davies identified social work’s ‘double-barrelled dilemma’ for actors advocating social reform, but also implementing state rules and regulations (1991: 9). Cree, thirty years ago, also painted social work as ‘... confusing, multilayered and contradictory’ (1995: 1).

One tension with implications for contemporary social work is the historical divide between rights-oriented professions and welfare-oriented professions (Howe 1991; Hickey and Mitlin 2009; Bell 2014; Androff 2018; Gabel et al. 2022; Garrett 2024: 2116). Rights-oriented professions focused on the advancement and protection of people’s political and civil rights. Welfare-oriented professions, in contrast, focused on providing support to address immediate needs such as social support, housing, healthcare, and financial assistance, mostly through individual, family, and community interventions. This divide was based on an idea of poverty and ‘private pains’ as social problems separated from human rights, which were seen as legal and political issues.

Many in social work have long argued that this divide is ‘artificial’ (Seebhom 1968: 172; Tarshish 2023), challenging the view of poverty and human needs as unrelated to rights (Healy 2008: 745). Yet, at policy level, it was not until the United Nations’ declaration of the ‘Right to

Development' in 1986 that an understanding of welfare and human rights as co-dependent became widely accepted. The 'Right to Development' explicitly framed economic development as a prerequisite for the fulfilment of human rights (Cornwall and Nyamu-Musembi 2004). Following this premise, the formulation of the 'Capabilities Approach' further helped illustrate the extent to which poverty restricted people's (legal) freedoms and rights (Sen 1999; Alkire 2005; Nussbaum 2007; Robeyns 2017). These key developments encouraged policymakers, as well as practitioners, to find welfare and rights integrated approaches to better address social justice issues.

In some countries, however, the divide between addressing welfare and advancing rights has to some extent continued through the divide between micro and macro social work (Androff 2016; Gabel et al. 2022). In this article, we employ the terms micro and macro to describe the tension between individual casework and structural change efforts that exists in many social work contexts. 'Micro social work' refers to interventions with individuals and families that prioritize addressing needs, therapeutical approaches, interpersonal theories, and risk management (Androff and McPherson 2014). Macro social work, in contrast, refers to community-based social work, social activism, community organizing, social planning, and policy change. For some, this divide reflects different training, specializations, or skills. However, many argue that social work has gradually traded the focus on 'the macro' to gain wider recognition as a technical profession (Reisch and Garvin 2016; Ferguson et al. 2018; Tarshish 2023). This is certainly evident in the training of social workers, with a de-emphasis on the macro components of practice (Gabel et al. 2022; Ray et al. 2024).

The growing focus on 'the micro', we argue, has limited the promise of rights-based approaches in social work, since most applications place social workers in the leading role of safeguarding human rights. Social workers, on this framing, are accountable for employing human rights as defined in legislative frameworks and codes of practice to guide their decisions and interventions, as well as to ensure service users' rights are protected. What this framing misses, however, is a bottom-up approach to human rights that does not place the social worker at the centre of rights actions, but the people they work with.

So far, the social work literature exploring human rights has remained largely theoretical (Reynaert et al. 2022; Tarshish and Benish 2025). Most studies discuss human rights as fundamental to social work, but less is known about how rights-based approaches work in practice (Cubillos-Vega 2017). Yet, there has been an increase in empirical research in recent years. Following McPherson et al.'s (2017), Human Rights Lens in Social Work (HRLSW) scale, and McPherson and Abell's (2020) Human Rights Methods in Social Work (HRMSW) scale, a number of studies explore how social workers engage with human

rights in countries such as Kosovo (Krasniqi et al. 2022), Finland (Kivioja and Mustasaari 2025), Bosnia and Hercegovina (Šadić et al. 2022), and Portugal (Carvalho et al. 2025), among others. Despite new research, empirical studies continue to be limited and most focus on how social workers apply rights-based practice. This is because, as scholars have identified, participatory and community organizing approaches are rare in contemporary social work (McPherson and Abell 2020; Šadić et al. 2022).

This article aims to (1) expand our understanding of how rights-based approaches work in practice and (2) empirically explore the practice of rights-based approaches from below (i.e. led by communities and not by social workers). Echoing other researchers, we call for a rights-based practice that refocuses away from individualized and technocratic models (Gabel et al. 2022; Reynaert et al. 2022; Carvalho and Albuquerque 2025). By doing so, we aim to provide a pathway for social workers to engage in collective participatory approaches that integrate micro and macro rights-based practice. In this article, we draw upon community development traditions that centre the agency and knowledge of service users and local communities as the primary drivers of social change.

A bottom-up approach to human rights: learning from community development

The rights-based approach in community development involves helping people (1) identify their rights and the barriers that might prevent the realization of their rights, (2) identify duty bearers (statutory services, private companies, government, practitioners, etc.), and (3) build on the capacities of people to claim their rights and pressure duty bearers to fulfil those rights (Silva 2003; Ife 2009). It helps people identify and claim their rights by engaging in critical consciousness, a process in which people develop a deeper understanding of the ways in which power and oppression operate in society and how these impact their lives (Freire 2000; Prilleltensky 2003; hooks 2014; Jemal 2017). Understanding how power and oppression work is key to avoid a situation in which people might not be aware of their oppressive reality, and subsequently, might not feel the need to challenge it and transform it (Watts et al. 2011). To facilitate critical consciousness, the rights-based approach employs techniques that promote collective dialogue and reflection on issues related to social justice, power, and privilege.

The application of a rights-based approach in community development, unlike in statutory and case work practice, challenges processes and interventions that place social workers at the centre of safeguarding and advancing rights (Ife 2009; Bartolomei et al. 2018). In other words, the rights-based approach does not merely hold that people have certain

rights, as shaped by laws, but seeks to engage communities and service users in participatory processes so that they, themselves, define their own rights and lead their own actions to advance their rights (Hamm 2001; Ife 2009, 2016; European Network of National Human Rights Institutions 2022).

The work of the housing rights organization this article draws upon, which we call the RB project for confidentiality purposes, can help us illustrate how the rights-based approach works in practice. The RB project was led by a group of council tenants in an urban community in Scotland that ranked as ‘highly deprived’ according to the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD). Tenants had identified severe problems of mould and damp, lack of insulation, pest infestation, and poor heating in their homes. One of the tenants decided to approach a housing association and a human rights organization to seek guidance, as tenants in her community felt frustrated with the local authority for the lack of responses and solutions to their problems. After initial conversations, the two organizations and a group of council tenants decided to work together by employing a rights-based approach. The aim was to support tenants’ rights claims and to pressure the local authority to fulfil its responsibilities as a landlord. The RB project involved the following:

- Critical consciousness on human rights. Tenants and staff got together to learn about housing rights and the experiences of other community groups undertaking a rights-based approach.
- Participatory action research. RB project participants, with the support of partner organizations, undertook their own research to identify the housing problems and needs of their community.
- Lobbying and campaigning. RB project participants ran campaigns and lobbied councillors of all political parties. They organized meetings, wrote letters, ran community events, and organized joint actions with other community groups around rights issues.

Research exploring the impact of rights-based approaches has identified that the active involvement of communities in defining their rights, and leading actions is key to achieving outcomes at the micro and macro levels. Some studies suggest that the rights-based approach, at the micro level, can help raise awareness, enhance confidence, skills, and knowledge; they can lead to positive behavioural change and improve social participation. There is also some evidence on the impact at the macro level, helping improve service provision, advance legislation, and challenge the negative stereotyping of marginalized groups (Noh 2022; Pace and Gatenio Gabel 2025). Yet, only a few studies have empirically explored the impact of rights-based approaches, and most have not

covered the impact of these approaches when communities themselves lead them. This article seeks to address this gap.

Methodology

This article draws upon the findings of a PhD study on the impact of rights-based approaches on well-being ([Asenjo Palma 2024](#)). The research employed a qualitative case study design that involved two stages. The first stage, case study, explored the impact that the rights-based approach had on material, social, and personal dimensions of well-being of a community of council tenants in Scotland. The second stage, contextual, explored the overall strengths and weaknesses of employing a (bottom-up) rights-based approach.

Well-being framework

To measure the impact on well-being, the study employed a well-being framework that combined [White's \(2010\)](#) well-being framework for development practice and [Oxfam Scotland Humankind Index \(2013\)](#). White's framework was developed to guide community development practice, while Oxfam's framework reflects what constitutes well-being from the perspectives of communities experiencing socio-economic disadvantage in Scotland. By combining these two frameworks, the study aimed to assess impact in a way that was relevant to community development and to communities facing socio-economic disadvantage in a UK context. These two frameworks, moreover, included multidimensional indicators of well-being based on the premise that well-being involves 'doing well and feeling good'. This multidimensional approach allowed a more comprehensive understanding of well-being that reflected both what is objectively considered to be good for people and what people subjectively care about ([Ahuvia et al. 2015](#); [Tiberius 2016](#); [White 2016](#)). [Table 1](#) illustrates the combined well-being framework in the research.

Case selection

The selection of organizations for the case study stage involved an initial mapping of community projects in Scotland that followed a rights-based approach. Mapped projects were then assessed to establish their closeness to 'ideal types', which is a common strategy to represent a set of comparable cases with specific characteristics ([Kuiken 2009](#)). In the context of this research, the project selected as an 'ideal type' included more of the features that are commonly associated with the rights-based approach. Specifically, the project selected was a community

Table 1. Combined well-being framework.

Broad dimensions	Indicators
Material and living conditions	Income Work (paid or unpaid) Housing
Social and community	Community safety Community support and inclusion Services and facilities Social activities Green spaces
Human and personal	Relations with family and friends Physical and mental health Education, skills, level of information Happiness and life satisfaction

Extracted from [Asenjo Palma \(2024\)](#).

development project run by a group of council tenants with the support of a housing association and a human rights organization.

The selection of organizations in the contextual stage followed a purposive sample strategy and a snowball strategy. Unlike the case study, in which the priority was to find a project that represented an ‘ideal type’ of a rights-based approach, the contextual stage aimed to include as much variation as possible between projects. The selection criteria aimed to identify organizations that applied, or were familiar with the rights-based approach, but that differed in the area of work (poverty, migration, equalities, etc.) and their target population (geographical communities, communities of identity, or a combination).

Data collection and analysis

The study employed semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis. A total of twenty-six interviews were conducted, involving twenty-seven participants with diverse expertise in the rights-based approach. The overall aim was to obtain a 360-degree view of how the rights-based approach works from different perspectives.

The recruitment of participants followed two stages. For the case study stage, a total of eleven participants were recruited in the roles of staff member ($n=1$), partner agency staff ($n=1$), RB project participant ($n=3$), and community resident/council tenant ($n=6$). For the contextual stage, a total of fifteen participants were recruited. Most participants were paid staff ($n=12$), with three participants in a volunteering/activist role. Participants in the contextual research stage worked in the areas of community development ($n=3$), migration ($n=3$), homelessness ($n=1$), advocacy ($n=2$), race equality ($n=2$), gender equality ($n=1$),

LGBTQ+ ($n=1$), disability ($n=1$), and minority ethnic women of faith ($n=1$). All participants were over eighteen years old, most being within the age bracket twenty-five to sixty years old. Of the twenty-seven participants, eighteen were identified as women, and nine were identified as men.

Documents collected, in turn, included four project reports and two video documentaries between 2016 and 2020, which added further information about the RB project and its impact. Project reports and video documentaries were publicly accessible, and documented the project at different stages, including descriptions of the actions, outcomes and challenges.

Interview and document data were analysed thematically using NVivo 11 Pro and following [Saldaña's \(2013\)](#) first and second cycle coding. The first cycle involved coding descriptively around four broad themes: how the project works, influence on well-being, strengths, and weaknesses. The second cycle involved narrowing down codes and providing conceptual and analytical explanations.

Procedural ethics

Consent was sought at organizational and individual levels, and confidentiality was sought at individual, organizational, and geographical levels. At the individual level, participants were only identified by the role they played, and no personal information was recorded. At the organizational level, projects were identified by their working approach and the area of work. This was essential to ensure the anonymity of individual participants, as it would be easy to identify participants if organizations were disclosed. Finally, confidentiality at the geographical level was sought because community development in Scotland is a relatively small field, and there was a risk of disclosing research participants if the specific geographical location of the RB project was identified. The study followed the guidelines for the recording, storage and archiving of data. All participants were informed of data management and access procedures in participant information sheets and consent forms. The study was approved by the ethical review committee at the School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh.

Limitations

Although the study provides qualitative insights into how the rights-based approach works, there are some limitations. Findings may not be generalizable beyond the organizations and individuals participating. The selection of organizations, in turn, relied on the construction of an 'ideal

type', which can be contested in the social sciences. Yet, the study followed a systematic approach for case selection and for the study of the rights-based approach by using various methods (interviews and document analysis) and incorporating diverse perspectives across different organizations and roles. This strategy facilitated data triangulation and in-depth analysis.

Findings

Impact on well-being (micro level)

The data analysed suggest that the rights-based approach was an effective strategy to help tenants improve their well-being across material, social, and personal dimensions. On material well-being, the RB project helped council tenants improve their housing conditions as their actions led to the council investing money to address the problems community residents had identified. As one of the tenants said:

I feel very privileged having this ... renovation, the changes they put in the building, [and all of this is] because we started a human rights way of looking at things. (Duncan, project participant)

The improved housing conditions also had an indirect effect on tenants' income. As stated in project evaluations, residents reported having reduced their fuel consumption as a result of the installation of more efficient heating and better insulation. For Liam, a human rights practitioner familiar with the project, but not directly involved in it, there was no doubt of the positive effect on material well-being:

There is change at every level [...] New windows, new doors, new bathrooms. [...] The person who measures success is not the community organisation, is not the council, is not the government, [...] it is the very tangible person, rights holder who sees success or not. And some of [the community residents] might not even have been aware that there was [this project] going on in the community. (Liam, human rights practitioner)

On social well-being, the RB project had a positive impact on tenants' perceptions of community safety, sense of belonging, and social relationships. Interviewees reported feeling safer for (1) having new security doors installed, and (2) knowing they had neighbours who were willing to fight for their rights. Employing a rights-based approach gave tenants a sense of 'protection' since their problems were 'more visible' to the local authority:

I think it makes me feel part of [the community] even though I don't [participate in the project]. Like I say, I do get to hear what's going on and it's a positive thing. It does make you feel a bit protected that

there's somebody that's got your back, you know what I mean. (Lucy, community resident)

Interviewees thought the RB project had helped them develop a stronger sense of community belonging. As Finn observed, before they were just neighbours, but now they felt more 'part of a community':

It reminds one that one is part of the community and that the community is active as an entity. And that is a positive inclusive effect. (Finn, community resident)

Interviewees also reported having improved their relationships with family and friends since the house renovations had enabled a better social life inside their homes. A number of tenants, for instance, reported no longer feeling embarrassed about their housing conditions, and as a result, they felt able to host family and friend reunions. As Rowan said:

There are some stories about people having their families at home for Christmas, for the first time ever. (Rowan, staff, RB project)

On personal dimensions of well-being, the data analysed suggest a positive impact on tenants' physical and mental health, as well as on their sense of happiness and life satisfaction. The work done to improve heating and insulation had reduced the incidence of respiratory illnesses associated with mould and damp. As Elspeth mentioned:

I've no had as many chest infections. I've no had any breathing problems right. [The house] is dry, there's no mould, right? That's [positive on] both physical and mental [health]. (Elspeth, participant, RB project)

Tenants also reported having acquired a sense of purpose, pride, and accomplishment that made them feel happier and more satisfied with their lives:

[The rights-based approach] just gave me... I'm going tae be truthful wi' you...it gave me the confidence that, yeah, [...] I'm a council tenant. I was getting housing benefit but actually, wait a minute, I'm the one [the council] answer[s] tae. I dinnae answer tae [the council], [the council] answer[s] tae me, do you know what I'm meaning. (Elspeth, participant, RB project)

The role that 'purpose', 'pride', and 'accomplishment' play in mental health and well-being is widely acknowledged in the literature. Purpose is thought to be a core component of psychological well-being (Ryff 1989; Waterman et al. 2010; Deci and Ryan 2015) and one of the most important predictors of happiness and life satisfaction (Bronk et al. 2009; McKnight and Kashdan 2009). It offers a sense of meaning and direction that helps people overcome negative emotions and life crisis (Burrow et al. 2014). Likewise, sense of pride and accomplishment helps people create a more positive narrative of themselves and their lives

achievements, and as a result, people tend to report higher levels of happiness (Compton and Hoffman 2019: 407).

Besides the impact on health, happiness, and life satisfaction, those more actively involved in the project benefited from acquiring new knowledge and skills. As Rowan highlighted:

They've learned about doing participatory action research, they've learned about analysing information, about presenting, about demanding change [...] I think [the effect on skills and knowledge], competently, is a positive direct effect. (Rowan, staff, RB project)

Key to the development of knowledge and skills was the work around critical consciousness, which helped tenants improve their 'understanding of human rights, and increased [their] confidence in using human rights to achieve change' (Evaluation report, 2020, RB project). Tenants engaged in shared reflections upon their living conditions and the ways in which they could act upon them. As Elspeth mentioned:

Many people living in our community just thought our situation was normal. We didn't realize that it wasn't right. Now, if we feel something's not right, we try to fix it. (Elspeth, participant, extracted from evaluation report, 2016, RB project)

In sum, findings suggest that the rights-based approach can be an effective tool to improve well-being at the micro level. The RB project helped tenants improve their living conditions, social relationships, health, skills, and sense of happiness, among others. These findings are consistent with other research on the impact of rights-based approaches at the individual level (e.g. Noh 2022; Pace and Gatenio Gabel 2025). The RB project was also able to have a positive impact on the wider community, improving the material, social, and personal well-being of tenants not directly involved in the project.

Impact on the wider community (macro level)

The benefits at the micro level also served as a catalyst to the pursue of broader social change (macro level). The shift in individual consciousness, exemplified by tenants' realization that their rights were not fulfilled, further motivated people to challenge power relations, and to pressure the council to fulfil their responsibilities. As a result, the rights-based approach helped challenge the housing conditions of all council tenants in the area, and not only the housing conditions of those more directly involved in the RB project.

The rights-based approach helped challenge structural inequalities and the social conditions that communities experiencing socio-economic disadvantage face. This wider impact was acknowledged by those more actively involved in the RB project. As Duncan stated:

Every human being has a right to a house, a safe, warm house, you know ... [...] and we've done it. That's a legacy. (Duncan, participant, RB project)

The wider impact of the rights-based approach, and its potential for social transformation, was also acknowledged by staff and activists interviewed during the contextual stage of the research. Interviewees thought that the rights-based approach can more effectively advance social justice than approaches that work only at the micro level (i.e. asset-based, strength-based, person-centred, etc.) because (1) the benefits are experienced beyond those more actively involved and (2) the approach targets 'the macro' without losing track of 'the micro'. For interviewees, micro-level work may help people cope better with their lives, but this is rarely transformative in a wider sense. Such transformation requires addressing structural barriers. The focus on the macro of the rights-based approach (addressing injustice) without losing track of the micro (people's well-being) is what enables this wider change. Rights-based approaches are thought to achieve more transformational outcomes because they directly address the institutional arrangements that sustain structural barriers. Kareem, a practitioner in a migrant's organization, for instance, talked about how people's lives improve dramatically when there is a systemic change:

Your whole life will change, you know, if you are succeeding [at] challenging the system [and] get to the place where you want to be. That's the best way. (Kareem, practitioner, migrant's organisation)

Hannah made a similar reflection in relation to what people can achieve if they only focus on individual behavioural change:

You can only expand your life so far when you're up against something that gets in the way, whether it's kind of poverty or other. (Hannah, coordinator, advocacy organisation)

Interviewees offered concrete examples of how rights-based organizations have helped influence 'law around housing' (Sandra, volunteer, community organisation), 'employment practices' (Lila, director, equality organisation) and 'migration control policing' (Micah, volunteer, refugee organisation), to name a few. Interviewees also emphasized the role of critical consciousness in mobilizing communities towards achieving wider social change, since it helps people make the connections between their experiences and the broader context. As a result, people are better equipped to challenge situations in which they may be blamed for the injustices they suffer. As Kat said:

That's one of the things that we want to do, is for disabled people to realise it's not their fault. You are isolated and, you know, you're in the position you're in because of the barriers [you face], not because of you. (Kat, project manager, disabled people's organisation)

In sum, our findings suggest that the rights-based approach, besides the impact on well-being (micro level), also has the potential to make changes at the macro level. The rights-based approach encourages people to reflect upon how power and oppression impact their lives. It seeks to challenge structural inequalities and the social conditions that communities experiencing disadvantage face, and not only the social conditions of those more actively involved in the approach. Other studies have also shown a positive impact at the macro level in regards to improved housing (Hearne and Kenna 2014), healthcare (MacNaughton et al. 2015), and legislation (Pace and Gatenio Gabel 2025), among others.

Challenges and barriers

Despite the positive achievements, it is important to note that the rights-based approach can also bring significant challenges, particularly for the people more actively involved. The RB project, for instance, had challenged a powerful institution: the local authority. The project aimed to shift the view of tenants as right claimants from being ‘adversaries’ to being ‘decision-makers’. The local authority, however, found it difficult to work with tenants collaboratively, and it often stayed ‘on the defence’ (Evaluation report, 2020, RB project). The local authority mishandled the communication with tenants, who were rarely informed of how renovations would be carried, and which flats would be prioritized. This, at times, created a sense of distrust among some tenants, who accused those more actively involved of ‘benefiting from their position’ in the project. As Rowan identified:

[The RB project] has kind of strained those relationships further in terms of what people think we should do about something or how the residents association is kind of managing the process and what’s important. There are many positives, but I do think also that it has hugely revealed tensions and that is very difficult to support people around, apart from saying “actually we don’t all need to be friends and that’s okay anyway, you’re working together on a thing.” (Rowan, staff, RB project)

Because achieving changes at the macro level is not easy, those involved in rights-based approaches are likely to experience burnout, stress, and anxiety. Indeed, these effects are not unusual. Other studies have also found that collective actions of this sort can damage relationships (Vestergren et al. 2019; Aceros et al. 2021) and lead to burnout (Gulliver et al. 2021). Elspeth mentioned how the RB project had sometimes put too much pressure on her:

It was also negative in the fact that [my neighbours] were constantly coming tae ma door and constantly phoning me. (Elspeth, participant, RB project)

Rowan also acknowledged this effect:

Unfortunately, we have seen some people in a situation where the Council have tried to come back at them for participating in this.
(Rowan, staff, RB project)

It is worth noting, however, that interviewees did not regret adopting a rights-based approach but hoped to pursue further claims. As Duncan said:

I was thinking of going to ask [RB project staff] if I could become more involved with Human Rights. Even if it's only a couple of days a week, you know, because I feel like I'm not finished doing what I am doing.
(Duncan, participants, RB project)

In sum, following a rights-based approach can bring significant challenges. Yet, our findings suggest that even for those who are more at risk, the benefits outweigh the costs.

Implications for social work practice

The RB project provides an example of how a rights-based approach (from below), consistent with anti-oppressive social work principles, can successfully bridge micro and macro practice, helping social workers address welfare and advance rights. The RB project helped people improve their well-being across material, social, and personal dimensions. The RB project also helped realize people's rights and advance social justice. Indeed, one of the most remarkable effects of the RB project was to improve the housing rights of tenants not directly involved in the project. This wider effect was possible because the RB project ultimately challenged housing practice, structural inequalities and the poor living conditions that low-income communities experience. The RB project challenged the power of the local authority as a landlord. It did not trade the 'macro' for the 'micro'. Nor did it place the social worker at the centre of the action. Instead, tenants engaged in critical consciousness and led the movement.

Drawing on these findings, we identify two key lessons for social work. First, the rights-based approach can help social workers avoid a situation in which trading the 'micro' for the 'macro' seems unavoidable. As the RB project illustrates, a rights-based approach can effectively integrate micro and macro practice, helping service users achieve individual-level improvements on well-being while simultaneously advancing their rights. Second, the rights-based approach can also help social workers 'de-centre' their practice. In the RB project, the practitioners involved were guides and process facilitators, demonstrating their beliefs in collective actors working for human rights focused change and development.

We are aware of the institutional and psychological effects of managerialist practices and the hardening of statutory social work, which has led to the withdrawal of community development and advocacy-based practices. Yet, in line with other research, our findings animate an approach where a more flexible, inclusive and engaging 'bottom-up' process is the vehicle for change (Gabel et al. 2022). The rights-based approach can help social workers bridge micro and macro practice without adding administrative/lead roles. This is because the centre of the action does not fall under the social worker, but the people they work with. This contrasts to a situation where the professionals are the centre point for interventions, and the focus is on risk management and technical tasks.

Yet, we understand that employing this approach may not feel easy in some contexts. Applying a bottom-up rights-based approach requires the creative efforts of social work leaders and social work teams, and fundamental changes in organizational practices. Refocusing social work, from the 'centre' to the 'side', is an expanded project that is outward looking in imagination and actions. In the context of a governmental policy push for prevention and early intervention, reclaiming and reenergizing bottom-up approaches in social work, and in particular the rights-based approach, can be a step in this direction, including its recognition by social work regulators and social work higher education providers.

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