Practitioners' Responses to Saunders and Roth's Ten Talking Points for Organising for Change

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Pre-proofs version.

Accepted for publication in *Voluntary Sector Review* on 13 March 2026

This collection of papers combines practitioners' responses to the Ten Talking Points. Neate (Shelter) reflects on practices like subversive humanitarianism, useful for rebuilding trust in charities. Kogbara (Place Matters) discusses the role of formal institutions in social change ecosystems and highlights the need for hope. McCallum (Greenpeace) focuses on the diversification and localisation of Greenpeace's activist base, which affects its decision-making. Saunders and Roth reply to the issues raised by the practitioners.

Keywords: collective action; activism; localisation; social change-makers, organising for change

Response 1: Polly Neate, then Chief Executive Officer at Shelter

During my seven-and-a-half years as Shelter's CEO, and five-years as CEO of Women's Aid before, I came to think of both organisations differently: not just as service providers and campaigners, as though those were distinct activities, but as activist organisations engaging in what *Organising for Change* (Roth and Saunders, 2024) describes as "subversive humanitarianism" (Vandervoordt, 2019). This recognises that helping people directly and campaigning for wider change are on a spectrum of activism: both are radical acts by organisations founded to change things – not just to pick up the pieces of system failure, but to empower, work alongside, and enable people to challenge and improve systems that have let them down.

One of the biggest obstacles facing both social change organisations (SCOs) and the public sector right now is distrust, and the disenfranchisement it creates. In his victory speech to Parliament, Keir Starmer said that "the fight for trust is the battle that defines our age".[i] I agree. Whatever the cause – disinformation amplified by social media algorithms, poor behaviour by public figures, the ever-widening polarisation of our public discourse – charities

have a responsibility to help rebuild public trust that is essential for them to achieve change. Charities cannot be the voice of the people, and never should be, but they can help challenge the way services destroy trust by letting people down, and by blaming them for the damage caused by system failure.

I joined Shelter at around the time of the Grenfell disaster, a fire in a block of flats in West London, which killed 72 children, women and men and devasted many more lives. At that time, Shelter was not explicit about how central growing inequality and discrimination were (and still are) to the country's housing emergency. But this was a case of breaking that chain of activism between the individual, the community and the national voice. These issues came to the forefront of our work with communities on the ground. The partnership we developed after the fire with Grenfell United, an organisation of bereaved relatives and local community activists, was eventually mirrored in community activism in every local area where Shelter works. Our activism developed from standing alongside individuals, to standing with communities, to standing for national change. Six years after the fire, the partnership with Grenfell United led to the Social Housing (Regulation) Act, which ensures such a tragedy and travesty cannot be repeated.

Charities like Shelter need to recognise, as *Organising for Change* suggests, that it is not always possible to get things right, and that our work is always learning-in-progress. It feels very risky in today's blame culture, but charities must be prepared to get things wrong.

Charities are not "the voice of the people", they are organisations that have to listen to that voice, and understand their power and the responsibilities it brings, without falling into the paternalism that so often accompanies philanthropy. There are numerous outcomes that can be attributed at least partly charities' work: the Hillsborough Law, Martin's Law, the soon-to-be-enacted Renters' Rights Bill, Water Special Measures, Mental Health Act (stemming from MIND's work), flexible working (facilitated partly through Pregnant then Screwed) and more. All stemmed from what is often called "service provision", but the benefit of those services for individuals was eventually writ large in major social change. That's why the concept of "social change maker", at the centre of *Organising for Change*, is so powerful and true.

Response 2: Lela Kogbara, Director Place Matters

Place Matters' mission is to tackle root causes of social inequity by strengthening and empowering individuals and communities to tackle social and economic injustice and create sustainable, systemic change. We connect communities to share learning and inspiration and build the practice and capability of community-centred, place-based change. We aim to shape the environment in which this work can thrive by amplifying the voices of communities to policymakers and funders, fostering trust and confidence in their work through a stronger evidence base, and enhancing the quality of funding available to enable more UK communities to build thriving places. We think of ourselves as similar to a "backbone" (Kania and Kramer, 2011) for SCOs. Funders and statutory organisations such as local government and the NHS, are often our key partners.

I find Roth and Saunders' (2024) concepts of social change makers and SCOs useful terms because they encompass a broad range of individuals and organisations using multiple tactics and do not generate "antibodies" for those of different political persuasions. However, I would question exclusion of statutory organisations, such as different tiers of governments and philanthropic funders, from the scope of SCOs. When I worked in local government, I and most of my colleagues certainly saw social change as central to our roles. Place Matters connects SCOs and state actors to achieve change. Indeed, work we recently commissioned suggests that when considering mechanisms for change the state is a key actor (Hitchen et al., 2025).

We have three approaches to achieving change. *Enabling* diverse people and organisations to come together and collaborate to act on what matters to them; *sharing learning and inspiration* between organisations and communities to build a wider movement for change; and *influencing* local, regional and national systems to change the system conditions that prevent communities from thriving. With respect to the Ten Talking Points, the three most resonant for Place Matters, which speak mostly closely to our enabling and learning approaches, are harnessing the power of the social change ecosystem, supporting and developing grassroots/community organisations, and recording and sharing lessons.

Saunders and Roth highlight working together, using fruitful divisions of labour and bridge building as key aspects of harnessing the power of the social change ecosystem. I would add understanding the ecosystem. SCOs and social change makers need to be attuned to questions around the knowledge their work draws upon. In addition to general questions about what is

known about the causes and effects of a particular social challenge, we need to go deeper and ask whose knowledge? Who constructs it? Who is making the meaning? For what end? These questions came into sharp focus when I worked at Black Thrive where the decision was made to set up a research institute and convene citizens' assemblies because it was apparent that a different approach to knowledge was required to address decades of poor outcomes for Black people in the UK. Social change is contextual and needs to genuinely centre the people that are affected. This can't be an optional extra. We need to build and harness the total power needed to drive change.

Place Matters has been facilitating two communities of practice that exemplify harnessing the power of the social change ecosystem, supporting and developing grassroots/community organisations, and recording and sharing lessons. Place-based Approaches to Early Childhood is a community of practice of eight place-based collaborations in England and one in Northern Ireland seeking to redress the fact that too many children from the most disadvantaged families in the UK do not have access to quality early childhood provision (despite clear evidence of impacts on the rest-of-life outcomes) and though there are some pioneering collaborations working to transform early childhood outcomes, there was no organised way to share learning *across* initiatives to enable other communities to benefit. In addition to sharing learning and building capacity, the aim is to catalyse discussions with funders, commissioners and policymakers on what it takes to shift the needle on early childhood outcomes at the place-level. Community foundations already do much to support their communities on health and other issues, for example over the last three-years 14 (of 47 nationally) community foundations in the community of practice submitted data that showed they distributed nearly £50m to support health related projects in their communities, 46% of which was their own money. The ambition of the community of practice is to develop a model of learning, practice development and partnership with health systems that goes further in improving community health and net-cost benefit.

Finally, I would add hope as an essential ingredient in any recipe for organising for change. Without hope SCOs and social change makers cannot persevere when facing adversity. SCOs generate hope in a range of ways – envisioning change needed, and providing a route-map to achieving it and through mutual support. Change makers and organisations should be encouraged by learning from our many successes. Thinking back to when I joined the Anti-Apartheid Movement in 1986, it seemed unimaginable that apartheid would end or that Nelson

Mandela would emerge from prison alive. But apartheid did end and Nelson Mandela was not only released from prison but became president. This was achieved by centring Black and other oppressed peoples in South Africa and pursuing structured campaigns that required the collaboration of tens of thousands of people in the UK – lay people, artists, lawyers, trade unions, religious organisations and local government. Hope can translate to real change.

Response 3: Will McCallum, Co-Executive Director, Greenpeace UK

The lessons from *Organising for Change* apply in a range of ways to Greenpeace. One important feature of Greenpeace is that it refuses to be constrained to a single theory of change or set of tactics, remaining adaptable to whichever strategy fits best to shift the power in its sights. One minute Greenpeace is in parliament, the next it may be engaging in a non-violent direct action or working with some Just Stop Oil activists lobbying for changes to policing and sentencing laws. Further to this, as an international organisation, the modus operandi varies significantly by place and historical context. There is, for example, a new office in Ukraine working out of bomb shelters that actively critiques Russia's invasion as "fossil fuelled". With regards to resources, Greenpeace UK has a £35m-£45m budget, making it a sizeable organisation. The awkwardness of Greenpeace – having feet in so many camps – makes the book *Organising for Change* really useful.

Greenpeace already engages – to a lesser or greater extent – in most of the activities recommended in Saunders and Roth's Ten Talking Points. The question then becomes "why are we not winning?". The answer is perhaps that we are not doing some of them well enough. For example, Greenpeace needs to improve the ways it works with people. One enduring challenge, shared across the environmental movement, is diversifying Greenpeace staff, activists and donors beyond white middle-class activists. The direct-action activists working with Greenpeace are often those who can afford be arrested; there need to be more appealing, meaningful offers to people to get involved in activism that go beyond signing petitions, but do not involve the same interaction with the justice system. To truly shift power requires working with a wider contingent.

The Greenpeace volunteering model historically worked through telling people what to do, which, whilst effective at delivering tactics, is ultimately very hard to scale-up. Other examples of effective social change (e.g. pro-choice and gun control movement) illustrate that what

really works is more akin to a grassroots organising model. And so Greenpeace is trying to re-think the way it works with local people, training them to be organisers, beginning at the last election with deep canvassing on climate change. During the general election campaign, we had approximately 250,000 in-depth conversations with people about the climate issue and ways to tackle it.

Greenpeace's role is to confront and undermine power. We aspire to do this through building our own resources, building on the power of others, including generating new allyships with a less transactional approach to coalition building such as providing stronger migration justice support and movement support grants and sharing resources within our warehouse. The challenges can often be around letting go of control – for example, how to not mind when a volunteer makes a *faux p*as statement, how to strike the balance with the requirement for strong technology and data protection, the challenge of our own resource limitations and the creative tension that emerges in collaboration. These challenges are all described and illustrated with examples in *Organising for Change* (Roth and Saunders, 2024).

Conclusions: Silke Roth and Clare Saunders

We are very grateful to Polly Neate, Lela Kogbara and Will McCallum for their responses to our Ten Talking Points for Organising for Change. Noteworthy is that our central premise, that "collaboration and multi-pronged tactical approaches are co-constitutive and crucial for delivering social change" (p. add-after-proofs) is reflected in our panellists' responses. Neate refers to a "spectrum of activism" to redress system failure and empower citizens, Kogbara to "communities of practice" that tackle issues on the ground by better understanding people who are disaffected, and McCallum refers to Greenpeace as "awkward" for its own diverse range of strategies that targets power "in sight". Neate recognises in Shelter's work that service delivery is not merely "sticking plasters" (Jupp, 2022) on wounds, but is also empowering, resonating with our talking point on valuing subversive work as a stepping stone to more overtly political forms of action, as well as in its own right (Talking Point 2). Even though they are each very different types of SCO, the need "to harness the power of the ecosystem" metaphor clearly resonates deeply with the practices of Shelter, Place Matters and Greenpeace (Talking Point 1).

We agree with Kogbara that people working in multiple levels of governance are also important for making change. We consider these people to be social change makers and discuss them as “insider activists” for exactly the reasons she suggests. However, we exclude governmental organisations and political parties from our definition of SCOs because it would make the subject of the study awkward and nebulous. Social change does not happen in a vacuum. It requires coalitions and collaboration, actions and interactions in multiple spheres.

Shelter and Greenpeace are large organisations working at the national (and for Greenpeace international) level, whose power, we argue, is a useful resource for organising for change (Talking Point 3). Neate and McCallum recognise the responsibility that such power endows upon these organisations. People affecting and affected by the housing and environmental causes must, they imply, be engaged and involved. It is encouraging to see that Greenpeace is finding ways to collaborate with the more radical counterpart it finds in Just Stop Oil (Talking Point 4) and that the (co)directors of both Greenpeace and Shelter are reflecting on the ways in which they work with community organisations, of which Place Matters is one important example (Talking Point 5).

More and less explicit in the panellists’ responses is the notion of resources: Greenpeace is relatively resource rich, as McCallum explains, but still has constraints on what it can and cannot do. Neate tells us how Shelter provided many professional resources for the local community affected by the Grenfell Tragedy, which subsequently shaped its working model. Kobara stresses the importance of community foundations disseminating money to where it is most needed, and the central importance of these resources to place-based organising for change. This relates neatly to a central argument in Chapter 4 of *Organising for Change* (and Talking Point 6), in which we argue that the funding streams for SCOs affect the nature and scope of their operations. This means that there are no straightforwardly right or wrong funding decisions.

One notable difference in the respondents’ comments is their approach to equality, diversity and inclusivity (EDI) issues, a challenge even for organisations that have it as a central focus (see Roth’s, [2025] summary of two important books). For Place Matters, centring Black people’s voices, which are at the heart of its work, is key; whereas engaging diverse communities in the first place is challenging for Greenpeace and the wider environmental

movement. In contrast, Shelter's mission – in short to provide a safe home for all – makes the organisation naturally inclined to support people socio-economically disadvantaged in securing suitable housing (Talking Point 7). Our suggestions for avoiding difficult power dynamics, for example by providing training (Talking Point 8) and using democratic fora – like the citizens' assemblies Kogbara valued at Black Thrive – and removing barriers to participation are apt for all three of these very different SCOs (Talking Point 9).

However, one of the most important reasons for which we are grateful for this academic and practitioner exchange is because of its importance in taking stock of progress, being honest about successes and failures, and contributing to social change processes through the sharing of knowledge (Talking Point 10). For academics and practitioners working to help achieve social change, our efforts are, as Neate so aptly puts it "always learning-in-progress". For as long as we have progress from our learning, and the hope that we can make a change, our efforts are valuable.

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Conflict of interest statement
The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Angela Ellis Paine for inviting us to present the opening talk to the Voluntary Sector and Volunteering Research Network conference (September 2024), and for her help with organising the panel discussion afterwards.

Contributor statement

This paper was compiled and edited by Clare Saunders, with clearly named contributions from practitioners. Clare Saunders was primary author of the conclusions, to which Silke Roth contributed.

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[i] A copy of Starmer's speech is available here: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c2j3nxd4kz0o, last accessed 10 March 2026.