

Local Safety & Inclusion Solidarity Networks

Elevating grassroots knowledge and the voices of people experiencing heightened structural marginalization

The Issue

Over the past few decades, regional and national coalitions, collectives, and advocacy/self-advocacy groups have been working to address the poverty and violence that marginalized people experience. However, advocates regularly note that, despite their efforts, there is a notable lack of improvement in peoples' lives; in fact, there is evidence that conditions are becoming worse.

Since 2012, IRIS has been working with local Indigenous, racialized, and disability partners across the country to address issues such as gender-based violence, access to justice, and housing disparity. We have learned the importance of focusing attention on grassroots community-based solutions, rather than trying to “fix” or reform local mainstream systems that were never built with these populations in mind. Community-led interventions can help create a space where people can begin to imagine what an inclusive community might look like.

Within the broad category of marginalized groups, we have narrowed our focus to the “marginalized of the marginalized”—those who are often excluded even in broader equality-seeking community-building and advocacy efforts, such as:

- Refugees, whose issues are often lost within the broader discussion of immigrant issues;
- People with intellectual, psychosocial, and cognitive disabilities, whose issues are often absent in the broader disability discourse; and
- Indigenous and Black/African people, whose distinct issues are not addressed within the broader category of “racialized” people.

Our community development work has also focused on women and gender non-binary people within these communities. We believe that if certain populations are supported to tackle the more complex barriers to inclusion they experience, less complicated obstacles will be easier to dismantle, eventually benefiting everyone.

Working with Local Safety & Inclusion Solidarity Networks (LSISNs)

What Are LSISNs?

Local Safety & Inclusion Solidarity Networks are rooted in a geographic community made up of grassroots, frontline service providers and community members of diverse marginalized populations, specifically Indigenous, Black/African, and other racialized groups; refugees; and people with intellectual, psychosocial and cognitive disabilities.

Local Safety & Inclusion Solidarity Networks work directly with the people who work with marginalized peoples—frontline, grassroots workers. Grassroots expertise is also critical in developing population-specific feminist responses to distinct experiences of marginalization.

The design of LSISNs is informed by an understanding of the broader context and specific manifestations of marginalization as experienced by Indigenous, migrant, Black/African, and other racialized peoples, both on their own and in terms of how these experiences of marginalization intersect with disability. Many of these frontline workers work to address the poverty and violence that is experienced by their community and therefore can point directly to the places where systemic barriers exist and what is needed to remove those barriers. These workers have lived, day-to-day experience of these barriers, and so are best equipped to work toward the needed systemic changes.

Local Safety & Inclusion Solidarity Networks work to build a holistic web of support by focusing on interconnected interventions that aim to 1) enhance economic security; 2) improve health status; and 3) prevent and more effectively respond to violence for these marginalized populations.

Core Functions

The LSISNs have four core functions. These functions occur in distinct, incremental phases that are not always linear in nature:

1. **Convene:** an intentional community space for the voices of grassroots marginalized people, activists, and workers to build social solidarity to promote equal value and respect.
2. **Respond:** to individuals who have been acutely marginalized by connecting grassroots agencies.
3. **Redesign:** community practices and systems to be more effective in addressing particular experiences of marginality through specific actions, such as by designing a Neighbourhood Situation Table (NST). While these actions on their own will not result in broad-scale systemic

change, organizing around these activities provides the opportunity to practise the kinds of relations and supports that we would like to see in our communities.

4. **Grow:** a constituency to address the structures of marginalization through law and policy redesign by working with all levels of government.

Key Components

Through our initial piloting of this model, we believe that LSISNs should use the following criteria if they are to realize positive outcomes:

- ✓ Be based in a local geographic community.
- ✓ Comprise grassroots community members and service providers of the most marginalized populations with a gender-based, intersectional focus.
- ✓ Work in solidarity with diverse marginalized groups.
- ✓ Work with a local agency to provide institutional support to LSISN activities.
- ✓ Identify a local organizer with a strong intersectional community network to coordinate the work of the network.
- ✓ Give priority to working with local grassroots service providers over local mainstream service providers (although mainstream providers can play a non-leadership role as observers or listeners).
- ✓ Have the necessary supports in place to help diverse marginalized people equitably participate.
- ✓ Bring awareness of the issues facing marginalized populations to the broader community.
- ✓ Place equal value on both the process and the organizing around an action in order to develop trusted relationships, voice, constituency building, and a sense of shared ownership.

What is IRIS's role?

Local Safety & Inclusion Solidarity Networks need to have a national framework to ensure that their work does not begin and end within the confines of a local geographic community—i.e., to ensure that positive outcomes do not get trapped in “islands of excellence.” Local-to-national strategies provide a framework to move learnings upward to inform broader systemic change through policy and program changes.

Grassroots local services hold knowledge that can enact changes that affect people's lives directly; however, they often do not have the capacity to connect and share that expertise. Therefore, IRIS will provide the technical support needed to support frontline workers to meet, learn, and strategize through:

- ✓ Convening and connecting diverse partners.
- ✓ Facilitating and bridging communication gaps.
- ✓ Offering community-based models for working together.
- ✓ Consolidating, developing, and sharing resources.
- ✓ Facilitating evaluation and project design processes.
- ✓ Supporting grassroots capacity building where needed; and
- ✓ Consolidating local and national learnings for broader-scale social development.

The LSISNs at Work

Since 2012, IRIS has been convening LSISNs in Saint John, Charlottetown, Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg, and Vancouver. In the first phase, LSISNs have

1. Convened dialogue between Indigenous and racialized peoples with and without disabilities;
2. Shared and learned about the experiences of violence and oppression as experienced by these groups; and
3. Held focus groups and workshops in each community to hear from marginalized voices and to share ways of improving service practices.

In Phase two, IRIS will use the results of these focus groups and workshops to identify a city-specific community-based "action," i.e., an intervention that puts the LSISN's collective understanding of what should be done in its community into practice, in order to address the systemic nature of violence and oppression for the target populations. Phase two will involve reconvening, developing, or reaffirming the proposed actions, and designing, testing, and evaluating prototypes.

Earlier results from past project work suggest that LSISNs in Charlottetown, Saint John, and Montreal may wish to pursue the NST model in order to elevate grassroots practice to reach and support marginalized populations. This model builds on an evidence-based, innovative, collaborative, risk-driven approach where at-risk people with disabilities and/or Indigenous and racialized people

work with a team of diverse grassroots community and mainstream health and social service workers to build a circle of support around vulnerable individuals. The NST could also set up a 24/7 emergency crisis response process that prioritizes the activation of disability, Indigenous, and racialized support workers over mainstream first responders (police and hospital care) at times of crisis.

In Winnipeg and Vancouver, LSISNs have been conceptualizing a Community Safe Hub (CSH) prototype. The CSH model is a physical space where 24/7 culturally accessible health and social supports (culturally/disability-sensitive trauma counselling, peer support groups, work with elders, etc.) will be offered by Indigenous, Black/African, and racialized service providers with expertise in disability work with people in their communities who are dealing with gender-based and other forms of violence.

In Toronto, the LSISN aims to build a women's housing community model by working with builders and architects to develop a housing pilot with appropriate supports for marginalized women and gender non-binary people. The goal is to demonstrate the viability of one kind of model of housing for low-income marginalized women-identified people to feel safe and supported, and have access to what they need to live a good life.