The first step in the PPR’s approach is to run development sessions with a group. The group identify a broad set of problems with housing/health/employment/education in their community that they thought were in need of improvement. They link many of these issues to international human rights and local policy standards and select those which strongest in terms of a human rights basis, local policy basis, and taking into account strategic factors. Usually around 6 issues are selected.

Under human rights law, government has an obligation to progressively realise economic and social rights. What this means is that things need to improve. Year on year, services and conditions should be getting better.

Through development sessions on action research, the group establish an evidential baseline through a number of methods including surveys, focus groups, photographic evidence, Freedom of Information requests etc. This assesses the extent to which these issues affect other people like them in their communities. It also provides evidence on what things are like now.

The group then finalise their human rights indicators. These indicators are basically measurements – they are measured by the group over a period of time, usually a year. This shows:

a) are things getting better on the ground in this community?

b) are the government progressively realising rights as required by human rights law?

Because time is not neutral when change is required by the most vulnerable, the groups also set targets for change or benchmarks. These benchmarks allow the group to identify the acceptable rate of change/progressive realisation of the right for them.

The value of the group’s indicators is that they measure if the most vulnerable groups are actually feeling the benefits of money spent by government, and the policies and programmes put in place. They are charting the impact of government policies on the ground, in their communities.

Under human rights law, the state is not a neutral actor. It is a duty-bearer, with an obligation to take positive action to realise economic and social rights, particularly for its most vulnerable groups. This exercise allows the rights-holder, the affected group to define what human rights progress looks like.

“At the international level there are enshrined values — principles. Those values and principals in the abstract need to be given substantive content and they can only be given substantive content on the ground by people who are interacting with the rights and who understand what they mean to their daily lives. And, they can ensure that the policies and programmes which are put into effect at the local level are responsive to local problems. That is what the human rights struggle is about — how to make those values that we all understand as universally applicable to everybody meaningful in our lives at the local level. That why this is so important.”

Professor Tara Melish, Director of Buffalo Human Rights Centre, The State University of New York speaking at ‘Rights in Action’ Belfast, November 2007