



Researching Social Justice Issues A Basic Guide

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<p>Criteria social justice research should satisfy</p> <p>The Board for Social Responsibility has four basic criteria that other agencies and individuals might find useful, in assessing the outcomes of our work:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are our conclusions consistent with what are the people who experience injustice saying? Is our 	<p>suggested action consistent with their aims and aspirations? (Injustice is primarily about violation of human rights)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are our conclusions based on credible and appropriate information and analysis (all information and analysis is based on values - we need our material to be based on appropriate values such as commitment to the poor)
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- Are our conclusions consistent with the Gospel as it has been interpreted by the councils of the Uniting Church through its resolutions and statements?
- Are our conclusions consistent with the Gospel as it has been interpreted by other churches? If we disagree with them, do we have adequate reasons for doing so?

1. Research strategy for a synod, assembly or other UCA agency

A Defining the context of the research

What is your brief?

What do they need to know about the issue? That is, why are you embarking on this work? If the agency has proposed the work, why has it done so? If you have initiated the work, why do you think it is a priority?

What is the public debate about?

Is there a specific government proposal that the agency should respond to? Or is the problem that there is a lack of government concern and action? Are there recommendations from a parliamentary committee, statutory authority etc that the government is considering (or is ignoring) e.g. Industry Commission or Human Rights And Equal Opportunity Commission report. If there is no official government proposal, what proposals are being touted in the media?

Is there inside information about proposals that are being discussed behind the scenes?

Framework

Are there policy principles/criteria (middle axioms) that your agency, the synod or assembly have adopted that provide the basic ethical framework for looking at this issue?

You may need to ask this question more than once in the course of research. You should ask it at the beginning, to help you evaluate material. You should reconsider it as you become more familiar with the issues and what is at stake - what seemed relevant may now be irrelevant, and some material that at first did not seem related might now seem relevant.

B The research

The fundamental questions in research

What is the problem that you or the government are concerned about? If you are responding to a government proposal, have they adequately defined the problem? Will their proposed action solve the problem? Will it create other problems? If you are calling for action because none is being proposed, why do you think action is needed? What is the problem? Why is no one taking appropriate action?

What is the basis of the proposal to which you are responding?

If there is an official government proposal or recommendations in a report, or if you responding to a proposal from another group, what is the basis of the proposal?

What is the empirical basis (factual information and analysis)?

What ideas are used to support the proposal?

What assumptions are made in the arguments for the proposal?

Is there work that your research can build on?

It may be specific research on this or a related issue.

- by your agency
- by other UCA agencies
- by other church or community sector agencies
- in publications that your agency trusts as a source of information and analysis? E.g. HREOC reports, particular journals or particular authors (including academics)?

What additional information and analysis do you need?

What issues have you discovered from the above sources? Who do the proposals or the inaction benefit? Who pays the cost?

What are your own questions and intuitions about the underlying issues and the direction church response should take? What is the basis?

What further information and analysis do you now need to argue a case? Where can it be found - other agencies? Libraries? Internet?

Theological reflection

Are there religious ideas that are being misused in the debate?

Are there ideological ideas that have been incorporated into the way the church has viewed the issue up to now, which should be challenged?

What resources can you find in the biblical and theological tradition that illuminate these issues?

C Reporting

What do you need to report to the agency?

Summarise your research. Provide full references so people know the sources and authority of your material. This is important in giving your work credibility.

What are your recommendations about what the agency or the church should say/do?

Make sure your report argues the case for the recommendations. Ideally, recommendations should appear in the body of the report at the point where they logically emerge, and also be summarised at the beginning or end of the report.

How can the agency's views best be communicated to the government or to other relevant decision-makers?

How can the agency's views best be communicated to the church?

What form of report and proposals for action should go to the church? What do they need to know?

Who do you mean by the church in this context? Individual members, congregations, presbyteries, synods or assembly or particular agencies?

How adequate are the church's current policy statements as a basis for dealing with this issue? Is it covered by the agency's mandate and by synod or assembly resolutions or statements?

Is there need for a new synod or assembly resolution to ensure an adequate mandate for the action that is needed? E.g. the adoption of new policy principles (middle axioms) that relate to this particular area of work?

2. Research strategy for small groups or individuals in congregations.

A Defining the context of the research

What is your brief?

Why are you doing this work? If the congregation has proposed the work, why has it done so? If you have initiated the work, why do you think it is a priority?

What is the public debate about?

Is there a specific government proposal that you want to respond to?

Are there recommendations from a parliamentary committee, statutory authority etc that the government is considering (or should be considering) e.g. Industry Commission or Human Rights And Equal Opportunity Commission report?

If there is no official government proposal, what proposals are being touted in the media?

Is there inside information about proposals that are being discussed behind the scenes?

Framework

Are there policy principles/criteria (middle axioms) that the agency, synod or assembly has adopted that provide the basic ethical framework for looking at this issue?

Do these policy principles/criteria need to be explained to the group or the congregation?

You may need to ask this question more than once in the course of research. You should ask it at the beginning, to help you evaluate material. You should reconsider it as you become more familiar with the issues and what is at stake - what seemed relevant may now be irrelevant, and some material that at first did not seem related might now seem relevant.

B The research

What is the basis of the proposal to which you are responding?

If there is an official government proposal or recommendations in a report, what is the reason and purpose for the proposal?

What is the empirical basis (factual information and analysis)?

What ideas are used to support the proposal?

What assumptions are made in the arguments for the proposal?

Is there work that your research can build on?

It may be specific research on this or a related issue,

- a. by UCA social justice and/or community service agencies
- b. by other church or community sector agencies
- c. in publications that your congregation or the relevant UCA agencies trust as a source of information and analysis? E.g. ACOSS publications, HREOC reports, particular journals or particular authors (including academics)?

What additional information and analysis do you need?

What issues have you discovered from the above sources?

What are your own questions and intuitions about the underlying issues and the direction church response should take? What is the basis?

What further information and analysis do you now need to argue a case? Where can it be found - other agencies? Libraries? Internet?

Theological reflection

Are there religious ideas that are being misused in the debate?

Are there ideological ideas that have been incorporated into the way the church has viewed the issue up to now, which should be challenged?

What resources can you find in the biblical and theological tradition that illuminate these issues?

C Reporting

1. What do you need to report to yourselves or the congregation?

Summarise your research. What criteria have you used? What information have you discovered? What is your analysis of that information? What are the issues that emerge? Who is experiencing injustice? What needs to be done?

Provide full references so people know the sources and authority of your material. This is important in giving your work credibility.

What are your recommendations about you, the group, or the congregation should do?

Make sure your report argues the case for the recommendations. Ideally, recommendations should appear in the body of the report at the point where they logically emerge, and also be summarised at the beginning or end of the report.

How can your views best be communicated to the government or to other relevant decision-makers?

Who are the decision-makers?

What avenues are available for public comment in the political process or the media?

- a. Indirect: letters to newspapers, articles in local newspapers, public meetings in lead up to election
- b. Direct: parliamentary committee inquiries, other government consultative processes, or simply writing to your local MP with a request that he or she provide your views and material to the relevant minister?

What arguments are most likely to convince them?

How can you best communicate your views to them?

How can your views best be communicated to your congregation or to other people in the church?

What form of report and proposals for action should go to the church? What do they need to know?

Should your report be forwarded to some agency of the church as a proposal for action?

How adequate are the church's current policy statements as a basis for dealing with this issue? Is it covered by the agency's mandate and by synod or assembly resolutions or statements?

If you want an agency or church council to take action: Is there need for a new synod or assembly resolution to ensure an adequate mandate for the action that is needed? E.g. the adoption of new policy principles (middle axioms) that relate to this particular area of work?

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