
Framing the Right to Housing: A Values-Led Approach

Niall Crowley and Rachel Mullen

Values Lab, Dublin, Ireland

➤ **Abstract** *This article explores a unique development from the Irish context in response to high and still growing levels of homelessness and housing insecurity. It is centred around a campaign to introduce a right to housing in the Irish Constitution and/or Irish legislation and the work of the Home for Good coalition in this regard. Specifically, it is concerned with the potential in values-led communication to motivate concern on the issue among the general public and action by them in support of a right to housing. Research was conducted to examine the narratives, and underpinning values, on housing insecurity and homelessness, human rights and the right to housing, and change and how change happens of a target audience for this campaign. This research was to provide the basis for developing the current activist narrative so that campaign messages could be designed that are true to this narrative, resonant with the target audience narratives, and engage values that motivate a concern for the situation and experience of others. The research raises issues that are of general concern for all who seek to communicate on and mobilise a public concern on these issues.*

➤ **Keywords** *Right to housing; values; values-led communication; communication; narratives; engaging values*

Introduction

Homelessness and housing insecurity in Ireland have reached unprecedented levels with little sign of improvement in sight. These issues are a consequence of a history of inadequate funding for social housing; a dominant value-set that prizes private sector endeavour and individual responsibility; and the depth of economic inequality in society. A range of issues emerge: inadequate levels of social housing construction; limited protection for tenants in the private rented sector; and inadequacy of welfare and support services available to those experiencing homelessness and housing insecurity. In such a context, civil society organisations are increasingly looking to the potential for change in establishing a right to housing through constitutional amendment and/or legislation.

One civil society response to the current crisis has been the establishment of the 'Home for Good' coalition: a network of organisations and individuals with the primary goal to achieve the insertion of a right to housing into the Irish Constitution. The coalition points to the imbalance in current Constitutional provisions, where rights regarding private property are not sufficiently balanced with the Constitutional recognition that these rights need to be reconciled with the requirements of the common good and regulated by the principles of social justice. The absence of Constitutional provision for a right to housing, in this context of imbalance, has inhibited solutions to the current housing and homelessness crisis. Further, the lack of a home acts as a barrier for people to exercise many other human rights.

Home for Good recently commissioned Values Lab to conduct research to collect qualitative data regarding the views of the public on issues surrounding homelessness, housing insecurity, and the right to housing, with a view to informing a future campaign for the introduction of a right to housing. The research project was coordinated and supported by the Simon Communities Ireland on behalf of the coalition.

Values Lab supports and mentors organisations and networks to take a values-led approach to all areas of their work. This includes a particular concern to support organisations to engage and embed values that motivate a concern for the achievement of equality, the accommodation of diversity, and the fulfilment of human rights (Crowley, 2015). Values Lab has pioneered the development and application of tools and resources for organisations and networks, to implement values-led organisational development, strategic communication, and campaign strategies.

This article draws from this small-scale research project. It is about how public demand for the right to housing might be built and a positive response to this demand achieved, and the centrality of values to the effective pursuit of such social change. It first explores the current role of public discourse in advocacy and policy-making on issues of homelessness and housing insecurity, and then provides some

background on the nature and potential of values-led communication in such a context. It then presents the approach taken to the research, the findings, and their implications for future work on strengthening human rights in the areas of homelessness and housing insecurity.

Public Discourse

There is a significant focus on homelessness and housing insecurity in public discourse in Ireland. The scale and nature of the current crisis provides material for an almost continuous coverage of the issue, in mainstream and social media. Public discourse on these issues is built around mainstream media stories of people, particularly families with young children, and vulnerable adults, in extremely difficult situations: sleeping in police stations, in cars, and on the streets; trapped in inadequate emergency accommodation; or living with the threat of homelessness due to spiralling and unsustainable rents in the private rental sector. Another significant strand of this public discourse is built around the regular publication of data on the escalating numbers becoming homelessness and the various reactions to these data.

The current role accorded to public discourse in the strategies being pursued for social change on the issue of homelessness and housing insecurity appears to be limited. The primary role, it would appear, is as a public space for contest between the advocate and the policy-maker, principally for the advocate to challenge the veracity of the homelessness figures and the lack of progress by state actors, and for state actors to defend their record. There is a further role evident for public discourse as a form of publicity in setting out what is being done by the various actors on the issue and seeking support for such action.

Values-led communication suggests a different and more ambitious role for public discourse in strategies to address homelessness and housing insecurity. It poses communication as a key tool for advancing social change, rather than simply as a means to present, defend, or contest information on the issue. It involves an engagement with a wider general public with the particular purpose of mobilising public concern and demand for social change. Such communication places values at the heart of all messages. This is relevant for advocates seeking to advance the right to housing and for policy-makers who require some form of public permission to prioritise investment at the levels required to address the scale of the current crisis.

Values-Led Communication

Values are those deeply held ideals that people consider to be important. They are key in shaping our attitudes and motivating our choices and behaviours. Values are central to any campaign for social change, given their capacity to motivate and, therefore, mobilise people to care about and to take action on social issues. Every campaign message and visual carries a set of values, consciously or unconsciously, that signal to the audience why they should be concerned with the issue in question. Values-led communication consistently and consciously engages audiences with those specific values that motivate a concern for the social change sought.

Research shows that people's personal values operate as part of an interactive values system, containing a range of values with compatible and conflicting motivational goals (Swartz, 1992). Our values can be understood as lying along two pairs of axes with conflicting motivational goals: self-transcendence values versus self-enhancement values; and openness to change values versus conservation values:

- Self-transcendence values encompass what are labelled 'universalism' and 'benevolence' values, such as equality, social justice, helpfulness, compassion and concern for the environment.
- Self-enhancement values encompass what are labelled 'power' and 'achievement' values, such as wealth, social recognition, and power and control over other people and resources.

Self-transcendence values and self-enhancement values have conflicting and incompatible motivational goals: transcending self-interests to consider the welfare of others and the environment in the former, versus the pursuit of some external personal reward, such as social status, power, or wealth in the latter.

- Conservation values¹ encompass what are labelled 'security', 'conformity' and 'tradition' values, such as personal, family and community security and stability, obedience, self-discipline, moderation and respect for tradition.
- Openness to change values encompass what are labelled 'self-direction' values, such as independence, freedom and creativity.

Conservation values and openness to change values have conflicting and incompatible motivational goals: maintaining the status quo in the former versus self-determination and freedom of thought and action in the latter.

¹ The term 'conservation' here does not refer to 'conservation' as this term is applied to environmental conservation, but pertains to conservative approaches and aversion to change.

Values research, in over eighty countries worldwide, indicates that each of us holds all of these values, and what varies is the priority ranking each individual affords to specific values (Swartz, 1992). Our environment and experiences on a day-to-day basis activate different values we hold, for example through consumer advertising, resulting in a balancing and rebalancing of different values we hold, with activated values getting priority and immediate attention. This process largely happens at an unconscious level. In this process, values are akin to muscles in that the values that are more regularly activated by our environment become stronger and get prioritised.

Research and survey work over decades provides compelling evidence that, in general, more people are motivated by self-transcendence values than by the oppositional self-enhancement values.² However, this is not necessarily or often reflected in the directions taken or priorities pursued by any society. This is because, while we may rank self-transcendence values as more important to us generally, on a day-to-day basis our environment is consistently engaging our self-enhancement and conservation values. This happens, in particular, as a result of the values communicated through mainstream and social media, consumer advertising, celebrity culture, and political discourse. In such a context, people give greater priority to pursuing their self-enhancement values, and, in what is referred to as a see-saw effect, their self-transcendence values simultaneously wane in importance.

Our environment is also prone to stimulate people's fears and anxieties, in particular through the content of mainstream and social media and of consumer advertising. This is particularly evident, for example, in coverage of issues surrounding immigration and social exclusion, and is also evident in coverage of issues of homelessness and insecure housing. This has a particular impact on dominant values within society.

Conservation values (in particular security values) and/or self-enhancement values are engaged in such an environment of fear and anxiety. People thus prioritise these values, which has the effect of simultaneously diminishing their more pro-social values (openness-to-change and self-transcendence). The motivational goals associated with these conservation and self-enhancement values are pursued to alleviate the anxieties and fears. These motivational goals include maintenance of the status quo and, thus, can undermine pursuit of the social change being sought in areas such as housing insecurity and homelessness.

² See for example: Each round of the European Social Survey questionnaire includes a twenty-one-item measure of human values, the 'Human Values Scale', designed to classify respondents according to their basic value orientations.

Values-led communication, such as campaign messaging, engages people's emotions much more effectively than fact-based communication. This offers greater potential to mobilise people to care about, and take action on issues of social concern. Research indicates that the self-transcendence values we hold, when engaged and, therefore, prioritised, motivate us to think beyond our own interests to a concern for the welfare of others (Swartz, 2007). This is the foundation stone for values-led communication to advance social change.

The goal in values-led communication, therefore, is to consistently engage audiences with the self-transcendence values that motivate the social change sought, values that audiences already hold, but may not always prioritise for lack of engagement (Mullen, 2018). Values-led communication must do this within a narrative that convinces people that change is possible and not something to be feared. Values-led communication, if sustained at a sufficient level for impact, has a capacity to disrupt dominant narratives that engage self-enhancement values as well as the conservation values engaged through fear and anxiety. This values-led communication unlocks a potential demand for positive social change, rooted in equality and human rights.

Research Project

The research project, commissioned by the Home for Good coalition, identified that the key audience for a campaign to mobilise a public demand for the right to housing was not those who already support such an approach, nor those who are immediately hostile to such an approach. The target audience for such a campaign is that majority of people who are less polarised about the issues surrounding housing insecurity, homelessness, and the right to housing. This is an audience that can hold mixed, often conflicting, views and value priorities in regard to these issues.

The research sought to identify and analyse the key narratives of this target audience across three themes: housing insecurity and homelessness; human rights and the right to housing; and change and how change occurs. It sought to establish the activist narrative across these three themes with a view to mapping the gaps and alignments between the activist narrative, shared by those seeking to lead social change in this area, and those of the target audience. This mapping enables an evolution of the activist narrative to more effectively communicate about, and seek to mobilise a demand for, a right to housing, while remaining true to its own values and analysis.

The research was small in scale. An online survey was designed to elicit the views of respondents on the causal factors for and possible solutions to homelessness and housing insecurity. This was disseminated by means of a snowball technique, to reach beyond the immediate networks of the coalition member organisations. The survey responses were analysed to determine those among the respondents who fell within the target audience and who were willing to participate in focus group discussions. Seventy-two such respondents were identified and contacted, out of whom twenty-nine people agreed to participate in one of the twelve focus group discussions organised, with twenty one people actually participating and eight no-shows.

A brief literature review³ was used to identify an ‘activist narrative’, which could be used as a benchmark against which the target audience narratives could be measured: for alignment and gaps. There was an understanding that this ‘activist narrative’ would need further refinement within the Home for Good coalition after the research project was completed.

Eleven hours of interview material was gathered and analysed to establish the key narratives held by the target audience, across the three themes. These narratives were further analysed to establish the surface frames (words, phrases) employed in the audience narratives and the possible cognitive or mental frames that these surface frames activate (Lakoff, 2014). Cognitive frames are those packages of ideas, values and emotions that we all hold in our subconscious and that enable us to interpret and make sense of the world around us. Cognitive frames are activated by language and images. For example, the word (surface frame) ‘home’ activates a cognitive frame we hold that has been shaped by our specific experiences, culture, and surroundings. This cognitive frame will contain certain ideas, emotions and values related to our lived experience of the word ‘home’ that, when activated, imbue this single word with complex meaning.

The analysis of the interview material provides a touchstone for the development of the ‘story of change’ to underpin a campaign for a right to housing. The ‘story of change’ encompasses the experience of homelessness and housing insecurity alongside its structural causes; is told using language and visuals that resonate with the target audience; activates or adapts cognitive frames held by this audience so as to engage their self-transcendence values; and remains true to, and is transparently championing the values underpinning the campaign.

³ ‘Making the Case for a Right to Housing in Ireland’, published by the Simon Communities in Ireland, June 2018, was the key document examined in examining the activist narrative.

This final step of developing the 'story of change' for the campaign did not form part of the project and is currently in train in the Home for Good coalition. Nonetheless, the research findings even at this early stage not only provide useful information about the audience narratives regarding homelessness and human rights and the issues that require careful consideration in shaping a campaign narrative on the right to housing, but could also inform future communications, by the various stakeholders, of a more general nature on the issue.

Principle Research Findings: Activist Narrative

The key activist narrative on homelessness and housing insecurity, titled "Victims of Dysfunction" by the researchers, is one of a significant and escalating crisis. Surface frames such as "tip of the iceberg", "stem the tide", "broken system" and "overburdened" activate frames that contain security-related values, thus provoking audience fears and anxieties.

The key activist narrative on human rights and right to housing, titled the "Solid Floor of Protection" by the researchers, is about securing a solid floor of protection and basic adequate housing for all. This narrative primarily engages values of dignity, fairness, and justice, captured in statements such as "home is central to the dignity of every person". These self-transcendence values are associated with motivational goals concerned with the interests of others, going beyond self-interest. This is aligned with and supportive of the social change sought.

The activist narrative does communicate that change is possible. This is an important element for any advancing of social change goals. It is articulated in terms of achieving a re-imagined housing system. The change dynamics offered by the activist narrative are legal action and the formal monitoring of statutory obligations.

Principle Research Findings: Target Audience Narrative

Under the first theme explored, of housing insecurity and homelessness, the narrative that dominated with the target audience focused on the potential vulnerability of anybody to becoming homeless in the ever-worsening crisis in Ireland. This narrative was titled "House of Cards" by the researchers. In this narrative people are on "a knife edge", a "slippery slope" and all it takes is for one thing to go wrong, such as a rent increase, and "like a house of cards, it could all tip over" and one could find oneself homeless. This matches the "Victims of Dysfunction" activist narrative in being anxiety-inducing and engaging security values, specifically values of personal, family, community, and societal security.

This is not fruitful ground on which to build an activist narrative for a campaign on the right to housing. On a more positive note, however, the various audience narratives identified were found to overwhelmingly contain a systemic analysis of the causes of, and solutions to homelessness and housing insecurity, and a recognition of the problem as being complex and multi-layered.

The second narrative theme explored was human rights and the right to housing. In discussing human rights in general terms, there was little immediate resonance with the majority of the target audience. This presents a challenge to developing a rights-based activist narrative that will resonate with the wider public and mobilise a popular demand for a right to housing.

In discussing the more specific 'right to housing', the dominant narrative is one of entitlement and people getting things for free, such as a "free house", which is juxtaposed with a sense of "some of us have to work hard" for these things. This narrative was titled "It's not Fair" by the researchers. There is a concern at people's tax money being used to finance such unfairness. Values of security, with the associated motivational goal of maintaining the status quo, and values of power and control, with the associated motivational goal of pursuing self-interest, are activated by this narrative. "Free things", "my money" and "squeezed middle" are evident surface frames. This too is clearly not fruitful ground on which to build an activist narrative for a campaign on the right to housing.

Another audience narrative among those identified, however, appeared to hold more potential for alignment with the activist narrative. This narrative was titled "Caring Society" by the researchers. Within this narrative the target audience expressed concern that we are losing our compassion as a society and that there is a need to tap into our caring and compassionate natures in order to address the current crisis. In this narrative, self-transcendence values of care, compassion, respect, and justice are evident. Human rights, in this narrative, are about ensuring a decent standard of housing so that people can live with dignity and be treated with respect, showing compassion, and taking care of each other. This narrative holds some alignment with the 'Solid Floor of Protection' activist narrative.

Under the third and final theme explored, change and how change occurs, the dominant narrative that emerged with the target audience was titled "Overwhelmed" by the researchers. In this narrative, the problem is so overwhelming that change seems impossible, in the immediate term at least. The housing and homelessness crisis is seen as chronic, getting worse, and there is little faith in government providing a solution. In this 'overwhelmed' dynamic, people feel that the problem is too big for their individual actions to make any difference. The change dynamics

are captured in phrases such as “long battle”, “chronic”, “what difference can I make” and “overwhelmed”. Again, this is not fruitful ground on which to build an activist narrative.

A less dominant change narrative among those identified, which was titled “Journey of Change” by the researchers, appeared to hold more potential for alignment with the activist narrative in rendering change as being possible. This narrative called up recent developments in Ireland, including the marriage equality and abortion referenda as evidence of momentum for social change under the rider ‘we will get there in time’. This narrative included some emphasis on agency with talk of people empowering themselves and organising from the ground up.

Research Implications: A Future Campaign

This research project is the first step in developing messages for a campaign on the right to housing. The ‘Home for Good’ coalition is currently working to build on this information and analysis.

The activist narrative is being further refined. The shared core values that motivate the ‘Home for Good’ coalition are being identified and defined. A shared over-arching narrative on the problem, the solution, and the change dynamic is being honed. This over-arching values-led narrative will then be reviewed against the target audience narratives for alignment, gaps, and tensions.

This process will enable the development of campaign stories and messages. This involves finding and testing surface frames that will resonate with the target audiences while remaining true to the activist values and narratives. It is not, therefore, about mirroring the perceived priority values of the target audience, in order for the activist to convince them that they are all on the same side. There is no mobilising gain in such an approach. It is instead about identifying the self-transcendence values that will underpin the campaign and then transparently engaging those self-transcendence values with the wider public. These are self-transcendence values that people already hold but may not always prioritise. Once established, the next step would be to test campaign stories and messages with key audiences.

Research Implications: Current Communication Strategies

The research findings offer some perspectives of relevance to the future more general communication strategies of organisations concerned with homelessness and housing insecurity.

Current communication on the issue of homelessness and housing insecurity in an Irish context, tends towards crisis messaging, which, given the scale of the problem, is understandable. The associated framing of “people trapped”, “the flow of families into homelessness”, “the tip of the iceberg”, however, can shape a narrative where homelessness and housing insecurity emerge as some sort of natural phenomenon over which we have no control, rather than as the result of political decision-making and choices. This feeds and exacerbates the ‘overwhelmed’ narrative in audiences, and their sense of fatalism about the possibility of change.

Crisis communication activates security values, which stoke anxiety and fears in audiences and stimulate the motivational goal of maintaining the status quo. This is counter-productive to the objectives for achieving social change to eliminate homelessness and housing insecurity.

The current crisis lends itself to facts and figured-based messaging: the soaring numbers, the numbers of families entering homelessness every month; and the public contests between activists and government representatives about the veracity of the homelessness figures. This can depersonalise the story, with people reduced to statistics. Such messaging fails to engage values and the gains that flow from this engagement. Facts and figures also get filtered through the stories that people already hold and the values underpinning those stories. If those stories do not hold self-transcendence values, the facts and figures do not engage such values or mobilise people to be concerned.

Individual stories are also relied on significantly in current communication strategies. These are primarily stories of individual hardship and misfortune. Individual stories tend to be recounted in the absence of any systemic analysis of homelessness and housing insecurity and can preclude any such analysis. This can be problematic for the search for social change, by limiting audience understanding of the change required, to the level of the individual rather than the institutional level. However, the research suggests this might be less of an issue in Ireland with its finding that systemic analyses are prevalent in the narratives of the target audience.

Individualising the problem of homelessness and housing insecurity narrows the audience peripheral vision on the issue, leading to public discourse contesting and debating about who is ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ among those experiencing, or at risk of homelessness. The research included a focus on audience narratives

about who is affected by the crisis. Three prototypes were identified in these narratives which the researchers titled: the 'traditional' homeless person, the 'ordinary decent' homeless person, and 'the sponger' homeless person.

The 'traditional' homeless person prototype was typically described as a male, rough-sleeping, the visible homeless person, and typically experiencing issues with substance misuse and/or their mental health. The 'ordinary decent' homeless person prototype was typically described as a two-parent intact family with young children, living in emergency accommodation such as a hotel room, or in an overcrowded situation with extended family, and with issues of unemployment, inability to pay rent or mortgages. This prototype was the one that the target audience most identified with and the one that evoked the most empathy. The 'sponger' homeless person prototype on the other hand was likely to provoke anger in the target audience. This prototype was typically described as someone who has a sense of entitlement to, and manoeuvres to secure benefits, and who make demands: of the state and of landlords.

These prototypes need to be managed carefully in any communication work on homelessness and housing insecurity. The othering of the 'traditional' homeless prototype suggests there is a challenge to ensure this group does not get left out. The 'sponger' homeless prototype needs to be actively disrupted if social change is to be progressed, particularly in any search for a right to housing given the dominance of the "It's not Fair" narrative of the target audience in relation to human rights.

Organisations concerned with homelessness and housing insecurity could usefully, therefore, examine the full spectrum of their communication activities on foot of this research project. This could involve the consideration of developing a values-led approach. This would involve creating new communication content and implementing the communication approaches that flow from using a values lens.

New values-led communication content is required to engage the values that would motivate a concern for and action on this issue by the general public. Values-led communication demands creativity to develop narratives that move away from a reliance on facts and figures and from personal stories that are devoid of a systemic analysis. Values-led communication requires consistency and the messages developed for the campaign on the right to housing should be embedded across all communication initiatives of the organisations involved in the campaign.

New communication approaches are needed, firstly in relation to establishing the purpose of this communication and its potential contribution to the social change sought. This focuses attention on the audience for this communication and the

need for greater focus on the general public as a key audience. The social change required to eliminate homelessness and housing insecurity will be built on motivating a public demand for such change through strategic communication.

This communication work is occurring in a broader societal context where the activation of people's self-enhancement values tends to dominate, most significantly through mass media and consumer advertising. To counter this, there needs to be a consistent and critical mass engagement of self-transcendence values. This points to the need for more collective and shared approaches across civil society to communication on this issue. This critical mass engagement is beyond the capacity of any single organisation.

Collaboration in communication needs to be built around a wide spectrum of civil society organisations engaging shared self-transcendence values and deploying shared messages triggering such values in their communication work. This collaboration is required if the necessary impact is to be achieved in an environment so dominated by self-enhancement values. The ongoing work of the Home for Good coalition and their commitment to build on this research project offers room for real hope that such a critical mass engagement with self-transcendence values could be mobilised across a wide range of civil society organisations in support of a right to housing.

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