



HOW TO START AN AMNESTY GROUP IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Date of Document: Edited August 2013

Source of Document: Lily Mah-Sen, Community Groups Program

Abstract:

Describes what community groups do and outlines the steps needed to start an Amnesty Action Circle.

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Thank-you for your commitment to human rights and your interest in starting an Amnesty International group in your community.

1. Types of Amnesty Group Structures at the Community Level

There are 3 types of “groupings” at the community level: the Amnesty Community Group, the Amnesty Action Circle, and the Youth/Student Group. ¹

We recommend that new groups start with the Action Circle structure.

a. Amnesty Community Group

Amnesty Community Groups are well-established groups of Amnesty members who come together and meet regularly (usually once a month) to work on human rights issues. The Community Group usually has a defined operating structure, led by elected or selected group leaders (usually consisting of a Chairperson, Recording Secretary, and a Treasurer who oversees the group’s finances and the group’s bank account. Some groups may assign individuals to chair specific tasks such as organizing their Write for Rights or fundraising activities each year.) At the beginning of the year, the group develops an annual work plan of activities. Some groups even hold Annual General Meetings to review and evaluate their past year. This is a very traditional set-up that came into practice in the early 60’s for most non-profit organizations in Canada and the USA. A traditional Amnesty Community Group would function a lot like the local Red Cross Society, or Lion’s Club, or the Chamber of Commerce. Some community groups have relaxed their rules over time and created more flexible structures.

b. Amnesty Action Circle

Amnesty Action Circles were set up to meet the challenges our members face in today’s world, with very busy work and home lives, and very little time to set aside for attending monthly meetings. Amnesty Action Circles are flexible in structure and operations so that that they can meet the different needs interests, and available time and resources of group members. The Action Circle structure

minimizes the amount of time needed for group administration, which means more time for working directly on human rights activities. Action Circle members choose the type of human rights work they are interested in doing, the type of meetings they wish to hold, the type of group structure that they want to establish, the frequency of meetings, and so on.

For example:

- The Whitehorse Amnesty Action Circle, whose members enjoy organizing an annual human rights festival, hold multiple project meetings leading up to the film festival. They then go on hiatus for a few months afterwards so that their members can recuperate and refresh.
- The Midnight Messenger, an Aboriginal Drumming Circle, drums Amnesty's human rights message at summer Pow Wows.
- The Amnesty Seniors Group, living in a homecare facility, meet regularly to hear guest speakers and to write letters.
- Some Action Circles enjoy organizing fundraisers, while others do no fundraising.
- Some are strictly letter-writing circles; while others enjoy engaging in public outreach and doing advocacy with decision-leaders (eg visit their MPs).
- Some Action Circles may have a small standing executive committee, while others have rotating Chairs. The Action Circle that just fundraises does not have a permanent chair, but they do have a treasurer who really understands how to manage the books!
- Some Action Circles do most of their business electronically (we actually have a "virtual" Action Circle made up of members who live in different parts of Canada!); while other Action Circles enjoy the social interaction of face-to-face meetings.
- Some Action Circles have chosen to function much like a traditional Community Group; with the understanding that there is a lot of flexibility to change as their members' needs change.

2. What are the Minimal Requirements for an Action Circle?

An Action Circle must have at least one registered member with Amnesty International. This person becomes the group's contact person with the national office. We would appreciate if the other members join Amnesty as individual members too; but this is not a must.

Action Circles do not need to pay an annual group assessment fee (which Community Groups are asked to do); but we do appreciate donations to help offset the costs of servicing our Action Circles.

In order to be recognized as an Amnesty Action Circle, the group must be registered with the national office.

The members of an Amnesty Action Circle must adhere to Amnesty's mission, our organizational values, and our operating principles. (see attachment for our Mission Statement).

3. What do Action Circles Receive?

We send each Action Circle a copy of our bimonthly magazine, the **Activist**, along with specific information and resource materials on group activities and human rights campaigns.

We also send occasional updates and information via email.

An Action Circle receives exactly the same materials as Community Groups, but it is up to the Action Circle members themselves to decide whether they would like to take on any of the activities and campaigns being promoted by the national office. (There are no expectations that Action Circles must join a campaign, or fundraise for Amnesty. A Community Group, however, is expected to contribute funds to the Branch and to take part in national campaigns.)

4. How are Action Circles Supported?

Staff Support: Lily Mah-Sen, in the national office in Ottawa supports the Community Groups and Action Circle program. Action Circles located in areas where we have regional staff are encouraged to contact their regional staff for help and advice. (Don Wright for BC/Yukon; Elena Dumitru for Greater Toronto Area; and Kim Cahill for New Brunswick and Nova Scotia).

Whenever possible, we link up each AI grouping with a nearby experienced Amnesty member, often a volunteer coordinator or fieldworker who can provide help and advice. An Action Circle can arrange for the Amnesty coordinator or fieldworker to visit the group, especially in the beginning stages of formation.

5. How Do I Get Started?

The next steps are:

1. Find a few people in your community who are interested in forming a group.

2. Decide on your area of interest, the type of group structure you would like to set up for yourselves, your meeting times, etc.

3. Start with a short-term project or issue that your group can do right away. Get your members working and learning together. It is much better to immerse yourselves in a group activity from the very beginning, and "learn as you go", rather than spending a lot of time developing long-term complicated action plans. You will want to do some detailed planning and evaluation at a later stage; but for now, keep things "doable" and simple. This will give your group an immediate focus. Working on a project together will help you gauge your group's interests and abilities. As well, your members will gain satisfaction in accomplishing tasks, thereby increasing their level of interest and commitment in taking on other activities.

4. Once you have the beginnings of a group in place, please contact Lily Mah-Sen in the national office to complete your registration process as an Amnesty Action Circle. Lily will send you a number of resource materials, and can advise you on how to advertise your group to find more members.

6. We Want to Get Started on Actions Right Away!

In terms of immediate actions for a new group, we suggest that you sign up for Urgent Actions, which can be sent to you in time for your meetings. If your group is particularly interested in certain themes or a geographic area, our Urgent Action Coordinator can select Urgent Actions which are of interest to your group. To sign on for Urgent Actions, contact Marilyn McKim at: mmckim@amnesty.ca

Another source of information on human rights actions is our website: <http://www.amnesty.ca> General information on Amnesty (our mandate, our history, our activities), letter-writing tips and calls for action, as well as resources you can order or download directly, can be found on this site.

Your group might be interested in taking on a long-term case of an individual who has either been wrongly imprisoned, or who is at great risk of being harmed while doing human rights work. These cases, called Long-Term Action Files, are usually allocated to Community Groups. Action Circles, which have proved they are relatively stable and whose members are willing to work on one case throughout the year, can also request a Long-Term Action File.

7. More Questions?

Please contact Lily Mah-Sen at: Lmah-sen@amnesty.ca; phone 613-744-7667, ext. 244.

ⁱ Amnesty Canada has a vibrant Youth and Student program. For more information about forming a youth/student group, please contact youth@amnesty.ca

Appendix: What is Amnesty International?

Amnesty International is a worldwide movement of people who campaign for internationally recognized human rights.

Amnesty's Mission:

We take action to free prisoners of conscience, protect refugees, abolish the death penalty, and end political killings, “disappearances”, torture and other grave human rights abuses. We also promote the full range of human rights of people everywhere.

In achieving our mission, we undertake research and campaigning work. On the research side, we gather evidence through fact-finding missions, testimonies shared with us, and investigations into particular cases and activities of government actors and others. We measure the evidence we find against international human rights laws and standards.

On the campaigning side, we expose human rights violations uncovered in our research through media and public education activities. We produce reports detailing the evidence we have gathered about human rights abuses. Based on this research, we make recommendations for what governments and other agents can do to ensure that human rights are protected.

The bulk of our campaigning activities involve letter writing by people all over the world to government officials and others with the authority to take action to bring an end to human rights abuses. Campaigning work also involves engaging directly with governmental and inter-governmental bodies - for example, by making submissions to committees, providing evidence in hearings, or meeting with governmental and consular officials to make our recommendations in person.

To read more about what Amnesty International does and how we do our work, please visit the “About Us” section of our website: <http://www.amnesty.ca/about-us> . You can follow the links on the left hand side for more about “What We Do” and our “How We Make a Difference” as well as information on how Amnesty is administered and financed.