



## **Conversation with Ignacio Saiz**

**Ashley Hopkinson**

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**Ashley Hopkinson: Can you introduce yourself? Tell me a little bit about yourself and what brought you to the work that you do today.**

**Ignacio Saiz:** My name is Ignacio Saiz. I currently work as an independent consultant and advisor on issues of human rights and economic justice. I have worked in the human rights field for several decades now. Most recently, I was Executive Director of the Center for Economic and Social Rights, which is an international NGO that works for a rights-based economy. In that context, we tried to promote an alternative way of seeing the economy as being about promoting human rights and promoting wellbeing. We had some engagement with other folks and movements who were integrating the concept of wellbeing in their work for economic justice.

Prior to my work at the Center for Economic and Social Rights where I was the executive director, I worked for Amnesty International. I worked for 15 years at the secretariat headquarters in London where I was director of policy. I've also headed up the work in Mexico and Central America for several years for Amnesty International. So really a broad range of human rights issues and most recently the intersections of human rights and economic justice.

My current work involves advising and various consultancy roles with human rights organizations (typically) at the international level, but also with philanthropic foundations who support this kind of work. Recently, I've been doing some interesting mapping work, surveying the landscape of what funders are funding, particularly with regard to economic systems change. I've been very interested in how philanthropy is or is not supporting civil society efforts or social movement efforts to really transform the economy and bring about an economy that's about wellbeing and human rights rather than profit and plunder, which is what we have now.

**Ashley Hopkinson: What do you think is distinctive about the type of work you're doing? You mentioned mapping in philanthropy, anything else?**

**Ignacio Saiz:** A particular interest of mine is how human rights language, human rights tools, human rights strategies can really help in the struggle for economic justice. For many reasons, I would say that the human rights community for decades has neglected the economics of human rights. It's been very focused on very important issues of political repression, disappearance, imprisonment and killings — the kind of work that Amnesty is well-known for, for example.

I think the economic injustices that often underlie those human rights violations are often neglected or have traditionally been less well-attended to by the human rights community. They're seen as messier issues involving a broader range of policies. Some people see them as too political. I'm very much in the camp that says human rights has to be about economic and social justice, and not just about civil rights or political rights. Important though those are, we need a more holistic and integral take.

A thread running through the work that I do is to see how human rights can really be a value. Human rights actors, the human rights language, the human rights framework, which is ultimately a legal framework or an ethical framework. For example, a lot of the work I did at the Center for Economic and Social Rights was about building bridges between the human rights movement and the tax justice movement. Progressive economists or social movements, primarily affected by unfair economic policies, for many years, have led really important campaigns for tax justice.

I've been curious, over the years, to see how the human rights movement can contribute to that. Most human rights people don't have a background in tax policy. It's really a meeting of two communities or more that need to understand each other's frames and how they can support each other. Now, I would say the tax justice movement is running with the idea that it has to be understood in human rights terms. Human rights can help us understand what tax justice means. What you mean by justice might be different from what somebody else means by justice, but human rights provides an important reference point.

It's just an example of how a particular concern of mine has been how to integrate human rights in economic justice struggles and how to make sure that different movements and actors are really reinforcing each other's work rather than pulling in different directions. That includes the funding community, not just civil society groups and social movements.

**Ashley Hopkinson: That's so fascinating that you mentioned the tax justice angle. I worked with a newsroom that produced a story on tax inequities and how that can impact health and wellbeing in communities. It's a connection I didn't immediately see as related to health.**

**Ignacio Saiz:** The issue of tax, in particular, can sound to many of us as something so technocratic and only for economists, and too messy for us ordinary folk to get involved in, but actually, tax is critical to everything because the right to health, the right to housing, the right to an adequate standard of living, all of those need resources.

Taxation is the primary way in which most governments generate resources for those things, for those social goods, for those public goods. To use wellbeing language— to promote well-being, you need resources and those resources need to be generated and mobilized in a fair way, in an equitable way.

Most tax systems that we have put a disproportionate burden on lower-income people. It's ironic that those who can pay the most get away with paying the least. That's why tax justice for me is profoundly a human rights issue and an issue affecting every social issue we can think of, health, housing, food etc.

**Ashley Hopkinson: What kind of support do you think is needed for overall systems change? What can practitioners, leaders, decision-makers, do to advance this idea of wellbeing from the human rights perspective with economies?**

**Ignacio Saiz:** One basic challenge facing all movements or all initiatives that are seeking systems change, is that we're still very fragmented. It's a bit of a cliché because everybody says this but we really do need to support cross-movement activism, more joined-up work across different disciplines. I think particularly in the wake of the pandemic when so many of the structural systemic problems that we're facing were laid bare and they often have very common problems. I think there's been more and more awareness of the need to work more collectively to build bridges across the different silos of advocacy of different movements.

In practice, that's difficult and that's still proving to be a challenge. Something like, The Wellbeing Economy Alliance, those broad alliances can help to bridge across movements and I think it's very welcome. A notion like the human rights economy or right-based economy, that was my hope, that it could be a useful concept for feminist movements working for an economy that serves women's rights or tax justice movements or economic justice or people working on development issues or debt justice. It could be a potentially unifying frame.

Having said that, people are wary of any organization, movement, alliance, or network coming along and saying, "We have the unifying frame." It puts people's backs up. It's like, "Oh, hang on a second. You're trying to incorporate my work. You're trying to appropriate my work," or "You're not aware of what's specific about my particular take or my particular perspective." I think we have to be careful about how we go about building cross-movement connections. For me, a critical area that needs support is that work across silos, work across sectors that are all seeking systems change.

For example, on the human rights economy, that could mean talking with labor unions about what does the concept of a human rights economy mean to you. What does it add to your work? Is it helpful? How have human rights incorporated labor rights? Many trade unionists might say, "The human rights and labor rights movements, they should be one and the same thing because labor rights are human rights. But in practice, they're different tribes."

Maybe these kinds of conversations with different sectors that are interested potentially in working more on economic justice issues with a human rights lens can see how having this concept of a human rights economy can be really nourished by their perspectives. What do feminist movements think about the concept of human rights economy? What can it do for debt justice movements, which are very important movements right now? Or labor movements or for climate justice struggles? Is it even useful to talk about a human rights economy? What might it mean in detail for what governments and others have to do to act on climate change?

On a more micro level, I would love to see a little bit more coordination or conversation between the different people who are working on notions of economy and human rights. I feel that there's not many people right now or organizations who are talking about a human rights economy, a rights-based economy but those few people that are there are not always working together and that really saddens me.

When I was at the Center for Economic and Social Rights, our strategy for the last three years that I was there, was called *Envisioning a Rights-Based Economy*. It was all about what does it mean if we understand the economy as being about fulfilling people's rights on a flourishing planet. The Center was very pioneering in doing that work. It was one of the first organizations to do this. It was well before the office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the UN's Human Rights Agency started talking about that. Some of the people that worked at the center then went to the UN and so have been our allies that we've worked with and are now part of the human rights economy work of the UN, which I'm really delighted about.

Even this small community that works on the human rights economy is a bit fragmented. I can already see divisions and differences of opinion and territoriality. We cannot afford to be disunited. We can't afford to be territorial about this.

**Ashley Hopkinson: What surfaces as evidence for you that you're making progress toward the goals that you have for yourself in terms of how you want to see things move forward in human rights economics? Do you have any specific metrics or markers?**

**Ignacio Saiz:** That's a great question. Some of the measures of success or metrics of progress from my consulting work now would be pretty similar to the metrics of progress that we had at the Center for Economic and Social Rights. We did a lot of thinking there around what is the change that we want to help bring about in the world? How do you measure that? A lot of the change is only visible in the long term. It's not as tangible as, for example, if you're doing relief work or development work and you say, "I built 2,000 latrines in this area." That's very tangible. Social change work is harder to measure. Some of the metrics of success that we use, and that I think still are relevant to my work is, am I seeing more uptake of human rights tools and human rights language in economic justice struggles?

And back to tax justice. I've recently joined the board of Tax Justice Network and I was just so impressed to the extent to which the team and the movements that they work with are full of rights analysis, rights works, citing human rights standards as government obligations to reform tax policy. It's incredible the change that I've seen there. I'm sure that's in part due to the work of organizations like the center and others who've been promoting a rights-based approach to tax justice. That's one of the metrics. Is there more uptake? Is there more effective use of human rights, legal obligations, and the legal framework, but also human rights language, human rights arguments?

Arguments for wealth taxes on billionaires. More and more people outside the human rights movement are using human rights arguments. The Brazilian government right now is heading the G20, and they are promoting this notion at a global level of a wealth tax of 2% on super-wealthy individuals and they're using human rights arguments. I can almost track the civil society groups and the social movements feeding into that. Now you have a leading government from the Global South using those arguments. That for me is a metric of success, a way I measure.

Another metric is around collaborations because I stressed how important cross-movement work is, and it just thrills me to see people working together who weren't previously working together. I saw something recently that really surprised me. It was a debt justice campaign and I saw some human rights groups were connected, that previously did not work on that. So more alliances, and more uptake of human rights language.

I guess seeing uptake by policymakers and people in power because very often in our work for economic justice or for human rights, we're often preaching to the choir. In the forums that we go to, we feel so self-righteous and everyone's nodding furiously, but that's not making change. Social movement power-building is fundamental to any kind of change, but that power needs to affect how decision-makers go about their work. ... At the global level, it's important for there to be leadership on these issues from countries like Brazil, for example, which is pushing on wealth taxation, or Colombia, South Africa and many other countries that are striking up very progressive positions on some of these issues. I think it's really important to have leadership from people in power as well as building power from the ground up.

**Ashley Hopkinson: So you're referring to collective power?**

**Ignacio Saiz:** Yes and I bring this up in terms of the question of metrics of success because I think particularly a lot of funders in this field traditionally are used to valuing certain evidence of change over others. They would say, "What evidence is there that you've managed to change policy?" We would say policy change is very elusive and no one organization can claim to bring about a policy change. Change in those other dimensions that we talked about—collaboration, greater uptake of ideas across movements (are examples). But sometimes I've felt they were less keen on those metrics because they seem less impressive and you can't only attribute them to the one organization; it's more of a collective impact. I feel funders need to value that long-term shift in the ecosystem and not just the big flashy policy wins.

**Ashley Hopkinson: That's valuable. I think particularly during the pandemic many industries were facing a reckoning, media included. So it makes sense that a paradigm shift would need to happen in other areas. What is something that you've learned through this space of working at the intersection of economics and human rights that you think is valuable to share?**

**Ignacio Saiz:** The first thing that came to mind is not specific to the work on human rights and economics. It's more of a general learning. Many organizations and individuals who work in the human rights, social justice, economic justice space have failed to internalize values of human rights and justice in the way we do our work. For me, human rights, social justice work is as much about how you do the work as what you do. Sometimes there's a dissonance between the what and the how.

This links back to the reckoning processes that you were talking about in the context of the pandemic because in many sectors and in many contexts, that moment forced us to hold up a mirror to ourselves about how we do our work, and who we are, and our positionality with regard to the justice issues that we work on.

The challenge is, it shouldn't just be a moment. There has to be lasting change in how we internalize values of human rights, or how we model values of human rights in the way we work. Things like how we talk to each other in the workplace, how we organize our organization, our hierarchies.

How we make decisions, how we see ourselves as accountable, and who we are accountable to and compensation scales, particularly when you're working globally, there's just so many inequities internally within many human rights and social justice organizations, or networks, or movements. I think the last few years have put that issue on the table more than ever before.

What would it look like if we really embodied human rights, and equity, and justice in our work, in the way we work, and not just in what we espouse or what we push governments and others to do? What does promoting wellbeing in the workplace mean? Movements are talking about the concept of wellbeing in public policy. But what does internalizing that mean in terms of how we work together and how we organize?

**Ashley Hopkinson: Given the right support, the human resources are there, the funding resources are there, what would you like to see expand?**

**Ignacio Saiz:** I feel I haven't yet been in a space that fully recognizes the range of actors that have already developed really interesting work on rights-based economy or human rights economy, on an equal footing without one person or organization saying "This is my gig." I would love for a conversation or a process to take the human rights conversation forward.

There just need to a more inclusive convening or a more collective convening that not only recognizes the full range of organizations and networks and movements that have been working on this issue, but that also reaches out to people that might well have a stake in it that haven't yet worked on the issue or people who might be constructively critical of it. People that can help us refine the ideas that are already on the table around the rights-based economy.

**Ashley Hopkinson: How would you define collective wellbeing given the space that you're in and the work that you've done in the world?**

**Ignacio Saiz:** That's a great question. My mind immediately goes to a human rights-based understanding. A state of collective wellbeing, whether it's in a community, city, country, region, or the planet, is one where everyone's rights are fulfilled and respected. Where people act with responsibility towards each other and towards the planet in recognition of those rights because rights entail responsibilities. People's rights can only be fulfilled if people's responsibilities are honored. Collective wellbeing needs to be holistic. It needs to embrace the economic dimensions of living collectively—

the social dimensions, the political dimensions, the cultural dimensions and the environmental dimensions.

**Ashley Hopkinson: Thank you, Ignacio.**

*Ashley Hopkinson is an award-winning journalist, newsroom entrepreneur and leader dedicated to excellent storytelling and mission-driven media. She currently manages the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of the Solutions Journalism Network. She is based in New Orleans, Louisiana.*

*\* This conversation has been edited and condensed.*