

How to change the world

Published: October 4, 2026, 6:02 am

How do you actually change the world?

In this Funding the Future podcast, I talk with my old friend and fellow Tax Justice Network co-founder John Christensen about what 24 years of campaigning have taught us.

Our argument is simple: problems without solutions breed despair.

Campaigning cannot just identify what is wrong, explain who is responsible or make people angry. Successful campaigning has to describe what a better future might look like and then develop credible proposals for getting there.

John and I discuss how this approach shaped our work on tax justice. When we first met in Jersey in 2002, we began developing what became country-by-country reporting. That campaign eventually contributed to major changes in international tax transparency.

We discuss what we learned from that experience: imagine the outcome you want; develop workable policies; understand your opponents' arguments; build networks; create a story people can understand; engage with political power; and have the persistence to keep going.

We also consider how solution-focused campaigning could be applied to today's problems, from social care and the NHS to inequality and climate change.

For decades we have been told that there is no alternative.

There are always alternatives.

The challenge is to imagine them, make them credible and build the support needed to make them happen.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_z_szl9vEsk?si=mKFODCUvty9kq7_P

This is the audio version:

https://www.podbean.com/player-v2/?i=vef4w-1b75351-pb&from=pb6admin&share=1&download=1&rtl=0&font=Arial&skin=f6f6f6&font-color=auto&logo_link=episode_page&btn-skin=c73a3a

This infographic supports this video:



There is no transcript for this video. This, however, is my summary:

In this Funding the Future podcast, I talk with my old friend John Christensen about something we have both spent much of the last quarter of a century doing: campaigning for change.

The conversation preceded the Funding the Future event in Ely, where solution-focused campaigning was a central theme, but it covers much of the same ground.

John and I have worked together for 24 years, beginning with the creation of the Tax Justice Network, and we used that experience to ask a simple question: what makes campaigning actually work?

Our answer was that successful campaigning cannot simply be about identifying what is wrong. Problems matter, and so does understanding why they exist, but endlessly describing them can leave people feeling powerless. Campaigning has to offer something more. It has to describe what a better future might look like and explain how we might get there.

That is what I mean by solution-focused campaigning.

John recalled our first meeting in Jersey in 2002. Within minutes, we were discussing what eventually became country-by-country reporting. The problem was clear: multinational companies disclosed too little information about where they made their profits and paid their taxes. Instead of simply complaining about that lack of transparency, we developed a specific proposal to change it.

That experience taught us several lessons.

First, imagine the better outcome. This is harder than it sounds. It requires moving beyond criticism and asking what the world would look like if the problem had actually been solved.

Second, turn that vision into a practical proposal. Country-by-country reporting worked as a campaign because it was not merely a slogan. We developed a detailed proposal that could be discussed with governments, international organisations, businesses, NGOs and journalists. Campaigners need enough technical understanding to show that their solutions could actually work.

Third, understand the system you are trying to change. Our tax justice campaigning was never simply about individual tax abuses. We wanted to change the structures that allowed multinational companies and wealthy individuals to avoid accountability. That was particularly important for countries in the Global South, which needed sustainable tax revenues rather than permanent dependence on aid, debt relief or trading arrangements determined elsewhere.

Fourth, build networks. The Tax Justice Network succeeded because it was never just a handful of tax specialists. We worked with organisations including Publish What You

Pay, Global Witness, Christian Aid and others. We developed relationships with journalists and filmmakers. We talked to politicians and officials. We also engaged seriously with those who opposed what we were proposing.

That last point matters. Effective campaigning requires understanding the arguments of your opponents. John and I spent considerable time listening to objections to our proposals and working out whether they were valid. When they were not, we made sure we could explain why. That meant that when we eventually sat in meetings at the OECD, United Nations, the IMF, World Bank, the Treasury and elsewhere, we were prepared.

Campaigning also requires political salience. Technical proposals on their own rarely change the world. Tax justice became politically powerful because technical work was combined with campaigning, media coverage, parliamentary scrutiny and grassroots activism. By the time tax avoidance became a major political issue after the global financial crisis, we already had solutions available.

There is a broader lesson in this.

A campaign needs a story that people can understand. Country-by-country reporting is technically complicated, but its basic message was simple: multinational companies should be accountable for the profits they make and the taxes they pay in each country where they operate.

Similarly, describing tax havens as “secrecy jurisdictions” helped change the way people understood their role. The language of a campaign matters because people need a narrative they can grasp and repeat.

We discussed how the same approach could apply to current political challenges, including the creation of a national care service. Announcing that such a service should exist is not enough. We need to imagine what it would actually look like. What people would be required? What training would they need? What infrastructure would support them? How would care be delivered where people need it?

The starting point is real resources. If we know what we want to achieve and the resources required to achieve it, finance can follow. Simply announcing money without designing the system that the money is supposed to create is not enough.

There is another requirement: staying power. Country-by-country reporting did not become international policy overnight. We were prepared to campaign for ten or fifteen years because systemic change takes time. Campaigning requires conviction, expertise, networks and persistence.

The central point of our discussion was straightforward: problems without solutions breed despair.

There is no shortage of problems to worry about: poverty, the NHS, education, care, inequality and, above all, climate change. Simply describing those problems more loudly will not necessarily persuade people that change is possible.

Campaigners therefore have a responsibility to offer hope grounded in practical possibility. They need to describe a better future, work out how it could be delivered, build the networks required to support it, create a compelling narrative and then persist until the political opportunity for change arrives.

John and I have seen that happen. Country-by-country reporting became a reality. Automatic information exchange became a reality. International cooperation through initiatives such as Tax Inspectors Without Borders has helped countries recover substantial additional tax revenues.

None of these ideas began as inevitable reforms. They began because people imagined that things could be different and then did the detailed work required to show how.

For decades, neoliberal politics told us that “there is no alternative”.

There are always alternatives.

The task of solution-focused campaigning is to imagine them, explain them, make them credible and build the support required to turn them into reality.

That is how campaigning can change the world.

[poll id="547"]