

What is people-centred advocacy?

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We have not made a single gain in civil rights without determined legal and non violent pressure... Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed.

Martin Luther King

Be the Change you want.

Mahatma Gandhi

Advocacy means amplifying the voice, but the fundamental question facing activists is whose voice and for what purpose. Across the world large numbers of people are marginalised and unheard in the corridors of power. Advocacy can work to amplify their voices, however, this aspect of advocacy is often less understood or put into practice. Advocacy is more often perceived as a systematic process of influencing public policies. Yet, while policy change is *necessary*, it is *not sufficient* to transform the structures, attitudes, and values that are at the root of societal inequities and injustice. Instead a more people-centred approach focused on social transformation is needed.

Characteristics of people-centred advocacy

People-centred advocacy is a set of organised actions aimed at influencing public policies, societal attitudes, and socio-political processes that enable and empower the marginalised to speak for themselves. Its purpose is social transformation through the realisation of human rights: civil, political, economic, social, and cultural. People-centred advocacy is by the people, of the people, and for the people. Hence, it is the spirit of democracy that drives the very idea of people-centred advocacy.

A 'people-centred' approach acknowledges the critical role of citizens. However, it seeks to go beyond the framework of a 'State-Citizen' axis to the arena of the people that include both citizens as well as disenfranchised people not recognised by the state as citizens. That is why the term people-centred, instead of citizen-centred is preferred. As Mikhail Bakunin pointed out 'No state, however democratic... is capable of giving the people what they need: the free organisation of their

own interest from below upward, without any interference, tutelage or coercion from above. ...no state... in essence represents anything but government... by an educated, and thereby privileged minority which supposedly understand the real interest of the people better than people themselves.'¹ Hence, people-centred advocacy is about mobilising *the politics of the people* to ensure that the *politics of the state* is accountable, transparent, ethical, and democratic. It is a mode of social and political action.

Ethical choices

In people-centred advocacy *being* is as important as *becoming*.

- Unless one believes in a cause, one cannot advocate for that particular cause. Integrity and legitimacy of advocates are what provide moral force to advocacy. Hence, it seeks to bridge the gap between the words and the deeds; theory and practice; rhetoric and real life experience. It stresses that unless you challenge and change yourself, you cannot change others.
- People-centred advocacy stresses the *compatibility of means and ends*. Unjust means can never be used for a just end. In this sense, people-centred advocacy seeks to change unjust power relations through non-violent direct action.

Rights-based approach

People-centred advocacy encompasses a rights-based approach to social change and transformation.

- People are not passive beneficiaries or charity seekers of the state or government. The state's political and moral responsibility is to guarantee all human rights to all human beings; particularly the right to live with dignity. Hence people have a right to demand that the state ensures equitable social change and distributive justice.
- Citizens are the owners of the state. Hence, the state should be transparent and accountable to citizens and defend human rights. People-centred advocacy

¹ M. Bakunin (1873) *Statism and Anarchy*, translated and edited by Marshal S. Shatz, Cambridge University Press, 1990. p. 24.

mobilises people and civil society against societal violations of human rights.

- It seeks to bridge the gap between micro-level activism and macro-level policy change. It stresses a bottom-up approach to social change rather than a top-down approach through macro-level policy change. It seeks to strengthen people's participation in the process of policy making and implementation.

Political perspective

- People-centred advocacy seeks to go beyond the idea of *advocating on behalf* of the marginalised to the practice of enabling and empowering the *marginalised to speak for themselves*.
- A value-driven process, it works to challenge and change unjust and unequal power relations, e.g. patriarchy at every level of society; from private to public, from family to governance. Values of social justice and human rights are at its core.
- It seeks to go beyond a state-centred approach to social change and politics to one shaped and led by the people. Grounded in the right to democratic dissent, it also includes the responsibility to work for just and viable political and policy alternatives.

Integrating principles

The three integrating principles of people-centred approaches are: *participation, communication and legitimacy*. They integrate its politics and ethics as well as the various arenas of advocacy.

Participation

Participation is not a mere strategy to manufacture consent, manipulate consensus or extract cheap labour. Participation is a principle based on an *inclusive* moral choice; participation means sharing power, legitimacy, freedom, responsibilities, and accountability. Participation is both a principle and means to include as many people as possible in the process of social change. Built on a deep respect for plurality, tolerance, and dissent, it also involves an ability to understand and appreciate differences. Transparency is a pre-requisite for true participation. In people-centred advocacy, participation is a crucial means to initiate, inform, and inspire change in all arenas of advocacy.

A deep sense of participation and communication help promote solidarity. Strong social movements sprout from a cause and identity common to large numbers of people sharing a vision and passion for change.

Communication

Advocacy is a communicative act and a set of actions that involves communications designed to promote social action. Community, collectivism, and communication are closely interwoven. The process of advocacy involves

different elements. These include: *Communicate to Convince; Convince to Change; Change to Commit; and Commit to Convert to the cause*.

Communication is not merely the use of language. It is an attitude – a willingness to share; to learn; to reach out; and to speak. The clarity of the message is as important as the choice of medium. An effective communication strategy involves the creative use of symbols, language, information, knowledge, poetry, prose, and politics. The commitment of the communicator is as important as the message. Such a process involves learning from people, sharing with them, and inspiring and being inspired by them. Advocacy communication needs to be consistent, continuous, creative, compelling, and convincing.

Legitimacy

Legitimacy is not merely about legality; it is both about ethics and politics. Legitimacy is not something one assumes, but something one acquires. Connected to the perception of power, legitimacy is derived over a period of time through a series of actions. It is the sense of deep commitment, accountability, communicability, and action that help to derive legitimacy. It is both relative and dynamic, and fosters credibility. Each arena of advocacy demands a particular type of legitimacy.

Arenas of people-centred advocacy

Defining the arenas of people-centred advocacy helps clarify the roles and strategies of different set of actors in bringing about social change. As Figure 1 shows, there are four arenas of people-centred advocacy – a) People b) Public c) Network/Alliance, and d) Decision-makers – that are linked to each other and overlap at certain points.

People

Key to the process is the arena of *people*:

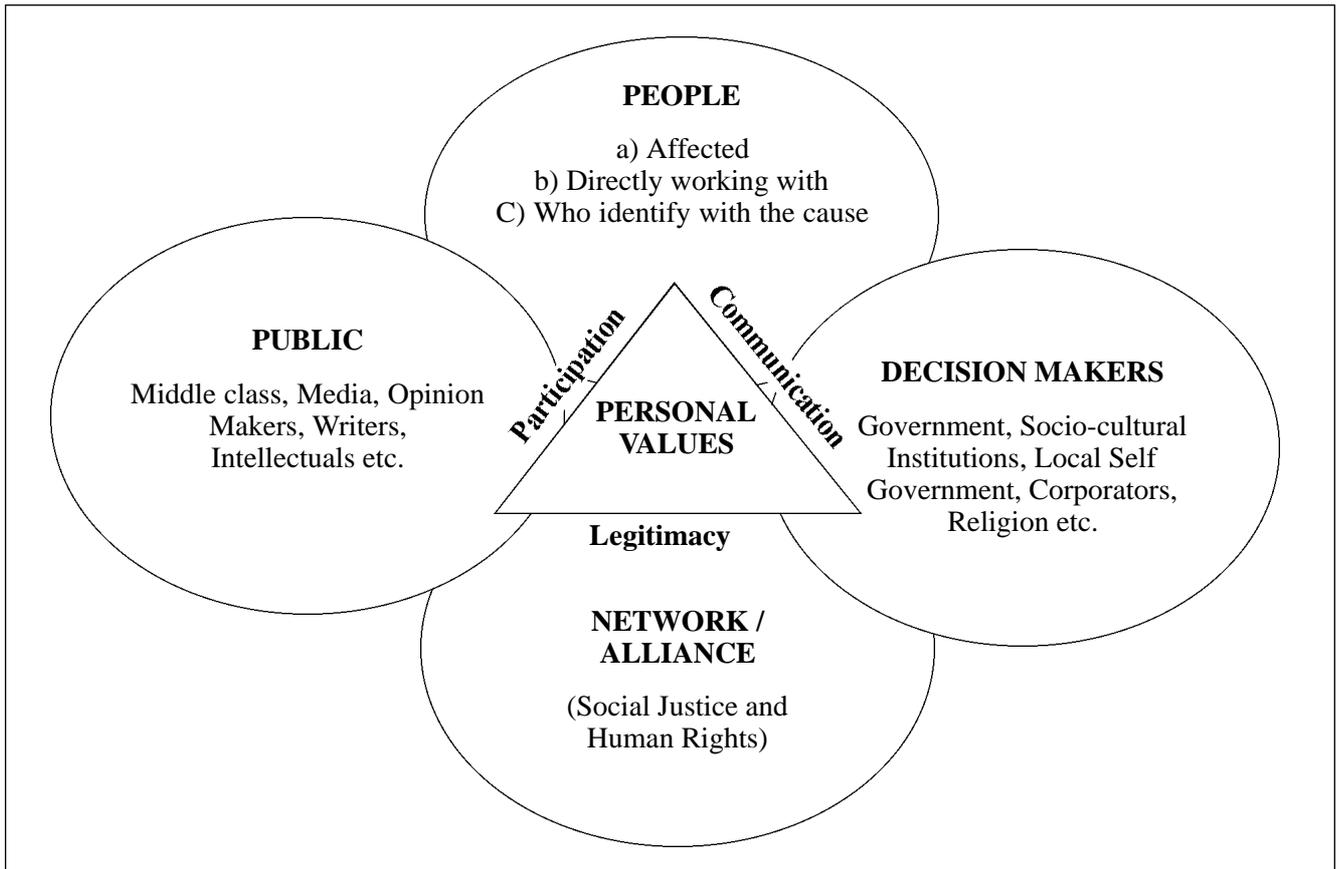
- those who are directly affected by an issue;
- those with whom an organisation or movement is directly working; and,
- those who identify with a particular cause or issue.

Advocacy work in this arena involves educating people on an issue, mobilising people around an issue, and organising a particular group or community for long-term social transformation. Mobilisation is a continuous process of interaction, learning, critical awareness, and collective action. It needs to educate, enable, and empower the people. Such a process needs a clear political perspective and a long-term strategy for communication and participation.

Public

'The Public' is one of the most used yet least understood terms. People-centred advocacy defines the public principally as the middle class, opinion makers, intellectuals, and media. Whether as perpetrators or

Figure 1 Arenas of people-centred advocacy



challengers of the status quo, they play a substantial role in shaping the political agenda and have the means to amplify the voice of the voiceless. To be effective, advocacy needs to tap a critical mass of the public.

Media Advocacy is the strategic use of communication and mass media to bring an issue into the public arena and the political discourse. It has two aspects:

- creating news through building collective action; and,
- articulating views through the media (see Box 1).

Knowledge-based activism is an important factor that influences the public. In the information age, it is not only the emotional appeal of an issue that matters, but the overall rationale based on a knowledge-based argument that makes a decisive impact.

Networking and alliance

The arena of networking and alliance is important for sharing resources, coordinating multiple strategies, and involving a large number of actors in advocacy. Networking widens the outreach and helps to build up a multiplier effect in terms of impact and public discourse. Advocacy seeks to integrate power of knowledge and the power of networking. Advocacy is also a process of negotiating with various institutions, including institutions of governance. Such a process requires long-term commitment and optimal institutional and financial

Box 1

Both **poetry and politics** can play a role in developing communication strategies. In a campaign against a Hydroelectric project in Silent Valley, a virgin forest in Kerala India, our experience validates the power of poetry in influencing the public. The Silent Valley campaign (1978-83) was basically meant to protect bio-diversity and to raise critical questions about the nature of development. No community was to be displaced by the project. The entire media, political establishment, and trade unions were for the hydroelectric project. Yet over a period of time four poets and five poems changed the public mood and political context. The poems caught the imagination of the young people, and many were mobilised through the People's Science Movement. Media could not afford to ignore the concerns of such a large number of middle class youth nor the opinion of poets, writers, and intellectuals. This created one of the first public discourses on the environment and sustainable development in India during the late seventies and early eighties. Advocacy strategies focused on the public arena can influence all other arenas substantially.

resources. Networking is an important means to synergise the strengths of both institutions and individuals that identify with the advocacy cause. Clarity of goals, compatibility of perspective, and convergence of interest are crucial for any sustainable networking. It seeks to bridge the gap between micro-level activism and macro-level policy initiative, developing multiple voices and diverse efforts in favour of the advocacy cause.

Decision makers

The decision makers are those who have authority to make decisions and influence power relationships. This includes not only state policies, but also those who have the power to make decision in socio-cultural institutions, corporations, religious institutions, etc. There are multiple arenas of power and institutions that influence public policies and social attitudes. For instance, many of the religious institutions and practices perpetuate discrimination on the basis of gender and cast.

Lobbying is a strategic process of convincing those in the corridors of power to make decisions or to exert their influence in favour of an advocacy cause. It is a rational process of making a convincing argument, using information and knowledge. However, the real bargaining power of a lobbyist comes from people, the public, as well as the process of networking. A people-centred perspective insists that lobbyists should be grounded in real life experience, and have an organic relationship with grassroots movements and the credibility and legitimacy that comes from that relationship.

Power, politics, and policy

Public policy is a function of the dominant politics. Politics is a dominant set of power relationships, so there is a need to understand the link between public policies and political process on the one hand; and political process and power relationship within the society on the other hand. An issue needs to be framed the way people feel and perceive it. An issue is a social, economic or political concern or phenomenon, which affects a large number of people over a long period of time. It needs to be understood in terms of power relationships within the society, politics of the state, and policy priorities.

One of the key problems in most of the countries in the Global South is the increasing gap between policy rhetoric and real implementation. Radical sounding language is increasingly used to gloss over deprivation, injustice, and inequality. Through the co-option of language, symbols, and institutions that claim to represent civil society and the marginalised, decision makers tend to create more and more **policy mirage**. Policy mirage is a public policy statement, which articulates a lofty vision and principles for change, without any clear programme to move toward that vision and without any budgetary allocation to implement the policy. Such policy mirages create illusions of change while perpetuating the status quo. Hence, there is a need to understand and change a public policy in terms of policy direction, relevant legislation, accompanying programme, implementing mechanisms, and most importantly, financial allocation.

People-centred advocacy always considers every aspect of policy, process, and negotiation in terms of the real impact it can bring to the lives of the poorest. Every action needs

to be inspired and informed by Mahatma Gandhi's talisman:

I will give you a talisman... Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man whom you may have seen, and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him. Will he gain anything by it? Will it restore him to a control over his own life and destiny? Then you will find your doubts and yourself melting away.

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