Causes, consequences, and solutions
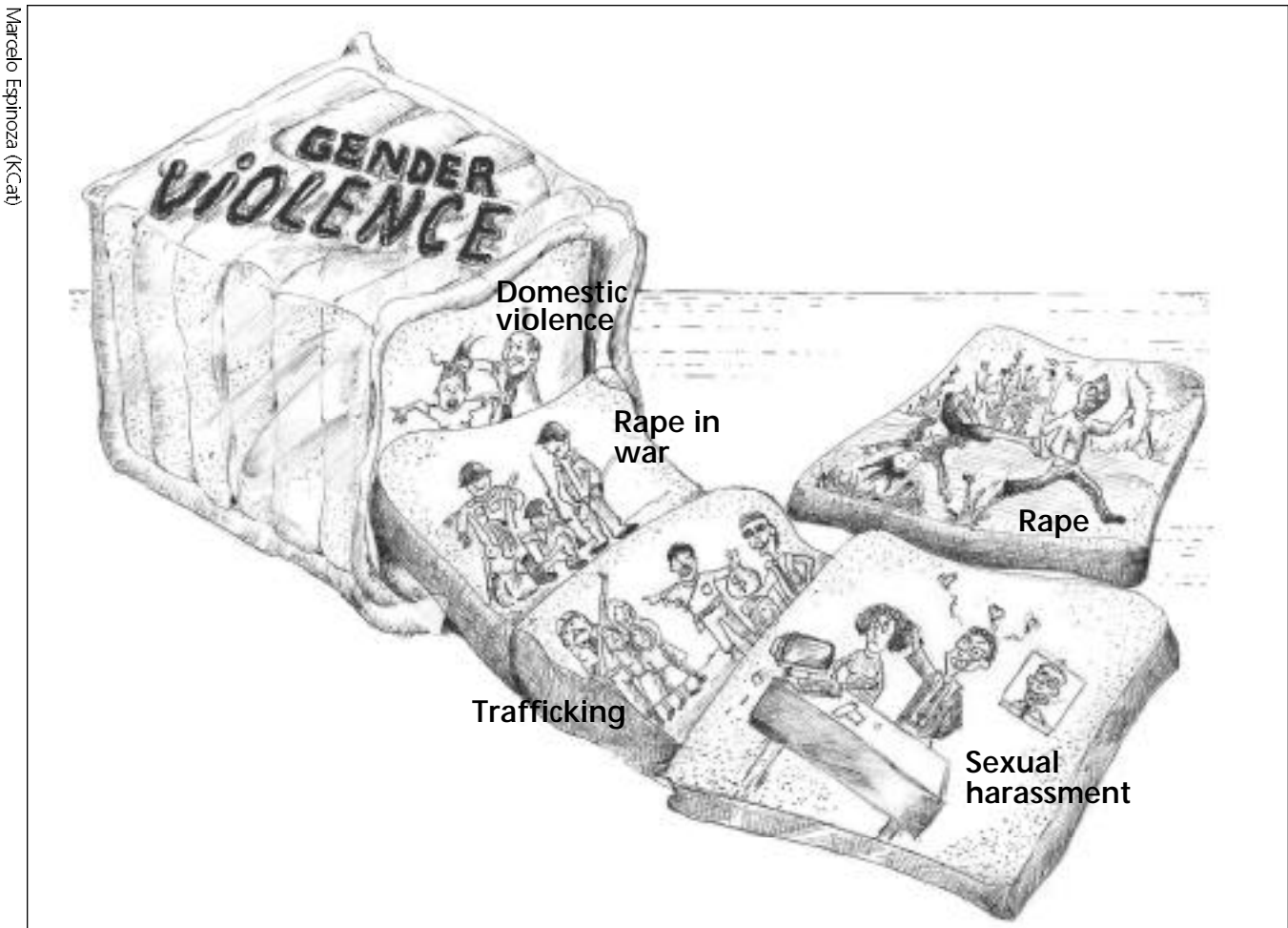
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Advocacy strategies look for solutions to real problems. For advocates, a problem is a negative situation affecting a specific group of people. Examples of problems are poor healthcare, corruption, unemployment, gender violence (Figure 1), crime, or environmental degradation. Each problem is made up of a variety of different issues. A 'good' advocacy issue is focused enough so that it can be linked to a clear policy/political solution and can be easily communicated to many people.

Choosing priority issues from among many urgent problems is not an easy task. It is a multi-step process involving analysis and negotiation within a group. One challenge in this analysis is that there are many different causes of problems. The causes can be interconnected and even contradictory. There are numerous tools to help structure and guide problem analysis and prioritisation. One example is the Causes, Consequences and Solutions Tool presented in Box 1. Mapping the causes, consequences, and solutions of a problem can be a good way to begin analysis because it produces a comprehensive map of a problem.

Source for Box 1: Adapted from VeneKlasen, L. with Miller, V. (2002) *A New Weave of Power, People & Politics: The Action Guide for Advocacy and Citizen Participation*, World Neighbors, Oklahoma City, OK: Ch.9.

Figure 1 Slicing a problem into single issues…

Marcelo Espinoza (KCat)

Box 1 Exercise: causes, consequences and solutions

Purpose

This framework helps analyse problems by making the links between causes, effects and solutions. It encourages discussion of a wide range of solutions and emphasises the need for social and political, as well as policy, strategies.

Process

This analysis is best handled in small groups that allow each individual to contribute. If your group is working on several problems, divide the groups up by the problems that interest them. (Time: 1-2 hours)

> *The consequences column shows how problems affect people 's lives.This helps in identifying constituencies. It also helps later on in choosing the targets and messages for outreach.*

1 For each problem, make a chart with three columns. The headings of the columns are: Causes, Consequences and Solutions.
2 Begin by identifying the causes of the problem. Write each cause in the first column of the chart.
3 Repeat the process for consequences, and then solutions. Sometimes there are not clear cause-effect relationships between causes and consequences. So the cause, consequences, and solutions do not have to be linked or related horizontally. That can be part of the follow-up analysis.

Discussion

- Are the causes listed the *main* causes of the problem?
- What are the social attitudes and power dynamics that contribute to causing this problem?
- How do the causes and problems affect people's lives? Who is affected, and how?

- What are the main solutions proposed? Do any of them address social attitudes?

Tips

- Before beginning the analysis, go through the process in plenary with a different problem to show how the framework works (see example below).
- Before starting, explain how causes and consequences are different: a consequence is the result of a problem, while a cause helps create the problem.
- This framework can be extended by adding a fourth column which shows who is responsible for each solution, and if there are scarce resources, which are the priorities for them to focus on. If the advocacy will involve government, an international donor agency, the private sector, or somebody else, the fourth column can be used to link solutions with different decision-making arenas and institutions.
- During discussion, always look for the main causes. For example, sometimes groups focus on low funding as a cause when, in fact, it is not the primary cause.

Example

The matrix below is an example of how a Ugandan NGO working on debt relief and budgets applied this tool to a big problem: corruption. The second matrix shows how, after selecting the more focused issue of poor primary healthcare as it relates to corruption, the group applied the framework to that issue. The group originally listed low motivation of healthworkers and said that healthworkers were lazy. After discussion, they understood that many healthworkers work long hours in poor conditions with little pay, and that these factors contribute to corruption in healthcare as well.

Problem: Corruption

Causes	Consequences	Solutions
• Wide spread poverty • Greed • Profit-centred priorities • Competition • Lack of transparency • Desire for power and domination • Lack of checks and balances • Lack of effective laws and regulations to punish • Desire to manipulate the system • Breakdown of moral values • Peer pressure • Inappropriate inherited systems	• Increased poverty and marginalisation of the poor, the powerless, and minorities • Loss of confidence in the system by the people/growing indifference • Unsustainable debt burden • Poor social services • Breakdown of moral values • Growth of powerful • Donor dependence • Emergence of dictatorship • Wasteful spending on white elephants	• Increased transparency and accountability • Increased community participation in decision making at all levels • Civic education for family and community • Stiff punishment for offenders • Political consciousness • Increased media involvement • NGO advocacy

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Problem: Poor and inadequate primary healthcare

Causes	Consequences	Solutions
• Understaffed clinics • Low motivation of health workers (low wages, some poorly trained) • Too few facilities; badly located • Poor health policy and planning • Inadequate funds for healthcare given needs of population (e.g. AIDS prevention alone is costly) • Unregulated drug use • War • Government has other priorities and poor who need healthcare most don't make demands	• High mortality rate (infant/maternal rate highest) • Poor child development • High prevalence of infectious diseases • Inadequate healthcare • Effect on productivity (GNP) • Low quality of life of poor • Drug abuse • Corruption by healthworkers • Most vulnerable people who need healthcare most are most abused	• Formulate clear, rational health policy emphasising primary and preventative • Monitor health expenditure • Increase pay and qualifications of basic healthcare providers • Punish embezzlers • Educate people about their right to healthcare • Encourage denouncement of bribe/extortion • Strengthen national drug authority • Increase health budget

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