Overview – making change happen: advocacy and citizen participation

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Advocacy and citizen participation are now widely accepted by civil society, donor and government institutions as means of ensuring greater transparency and accountability. Yet in practice, much of what is done in the name of both advocacy and participation is quite shallow. Advocacy is often seen as a systematic and technical exercise that assumes an open and pluralist environment relatively devoid of conflict, risk, and power abuses. Citizen participation, likewise, is regularly woven into existing procedures and policy making as a limited form of public consultation. In both cases, there has been a tendency to reinforce, rather than change, the models of development and governance advanced by the International Financial Institutions, donor agencies, or unresponsive state elites.

At the same time, the world is full of creative advocacy and citizen participation initiatives that are contributing to profound processes of change. This issue of *PLA Notes* is an effort to document and share such examples from Asia, Africa and the Americas. The spark for this collection came from a workshop held in November 2001, involving diverse activists and thinkers from around the world with a shared commitment to equity and social justice. The workshop's goal was, in essence, to *reclaim* advocacy and citizen participation as deeper, longer-term processes of organising, consciousness raising, political empowerment, and social transformation.

The workshop participants were concerned, foremost, with examining what we really mean by participatory advocacy. How does it differ from mainstream concepts? How is it linked with other strategies and processes of social change? What key elements of citizen education, training and organising are involved? What competencies and skills are required? What challenges and dilemmas are encountered? How do we handle issues of representation and accountability in advocacy movements? What are the strategic entry points for participatory advocacy (on local, national, global levels)? Where should we be working to deepen citizen participation, and where should we be wary of the dangers of misuse and cooptation? How do we measure success and failure?

Participants explored these questions through rich and varied exchanges over four days. Throughout, there was a conscious effort to examine the dynamics of *power* and *conflict* that arise in advocacy and citizen participation efforts. How do we understand and confront power relations in participatory advocacy? What are the dynamics of including the excluded? How do we embrace and understand conflict as a critical part of political change? How can participatory advocacy build and use alternative forms of power?

In response to these questions, participants shared case studies, strategies, methods, and personal experiences, analysing them for their theoretical lessons and practical insights. This issue of *PLA Notes* presents this shared learning, some written by workshop participants and others submitted afterwards by co-workers. The articles are enriched by excerpts from a recently published field guide entitled *A New Weave of Power, People, and Politics: The Action Guide for Advocacy and Citizen Participation*, written by two of the workshop's facilitators, Lisa VeneKlasen and Valerie Miller (see In-Touch section in this issue for publication details).

Taken together, these case studies, articles, and practical tools underscore important lessons for all of us engaging in citizen participation and advocacy work. While all of the cases reveal the nuances of political process and the determination of citizens to influence decisions that affect their lives, they also affirm that advocacy and citizen participation strategies do not come in a one-size-fits-all formula. Each context presents a unique set of actors, opportunities, risks, and challenges for citizens to navigate for change.

Overview of this issue of *PLA Notes*

Throughout this issue, we have placed a selection of key frameworks and examples from the *Action Guide* that can help advocates navigate the complexities of social change, power, and empowerment. The first excerpt, 'The advocacy debate', is a brief advocacy story that vividly spells out the need to understand advocacy not only in terms of policy changes but also as changes in structures, values and people. The second, 'Causes, consequences and solutions' is a useful planning framework that helps groups dissect problems in order to develop targeted organising and policy responses that address root causes. The third, 'Assessing entry points' highlights some key issues that can help advocates determine whether an

opportunity to engage with decision makers is truly a meaningful chance for influence and change. The final selection is a discussion about levels of power and processes of empowerment, and uses two charts – 'Chaz' and 'Power, political participation and social change' – to explore both practical and theoretical issues and to reflect key lessons from gender work.

Definitions of advocacy abound. As pointed out in the *Action Guide*, these varying definitions 'reflect different assumptions about how politics and power operate, and how change happens.' John Samuel, in the opening article, provides a useful introduction to the concept of participatory or people-centred advocacy that emphasises the direct role marginalised groups must play if equitable power relations and advocacy victories are to be sustained. He highlights the main differences between advocacy viewed as a systemic process of policy change, and advocacy understood as a process of social transformation. The latter, as many of these articles illustrate, involves long-term efforts to re-shape societal attitudes, values, and power relations. Samuel identifies key elements of this approach that resonate throughout the case studies, such as the role of a robust and culturally sensitive approach to communication and popular education; the importance of media advocacy; the need to build strong alliances and networks; and the pivotal issue of power relations.

> *Advocacy is not just about getting to the table with a new set of interests, it's about changing the size and configuration of the table to accommodate a whole new set of actors. Effective advocacy challenges imbalances of power and changes thinking.*
> VeneKlasen, L. with Miller, V. (2002) *A New Weave of Power, People & Politics: The Action Guide for Advocacy and Citizen Participation*, World Neighbors

South Asia

Two case studies from India, provided by activists working with ActionAid, explore the process of mobilising citizen action around the right to information. Backed by India's 93rd Constitutional amendment guaranteeing the public's right to information, there have been many efforts to expose corruption and injustice, and to make government and businesses more accountable. Mohammed Asif and his colleagues document a recent experience with a participatory social audit carried out with highly marginalised villages in Orissa suffering under a less-than-transparent *panchayat* (local government). A campaign involving participatory action research, popular education, training and alliances among people's organisations, NGOs, sympathetic government officials and the media, led to exposure and prosecution of corrupt *panchayat* officials.

Arundhuti Roy Choudhury charts the course of a broader advocacy initiative to curb the misuse of public grain and food-for-work resources, much of which do not reach the poor and hungry for whom they are intended. Using a combination of direct citizen advocacy and legal action, public interest litigation was filed in Rajasthan naming 14 Indian states with high inefficiencies in public food distribution. A successful Supreme Court ruling was obtained, and its implementation is now being monitored by a broad-based national campaign. These Indian examples demonstrate the potential of advocacy rooted in the power of *knowledge* and *information*; and show how participatory research, direct advocacy and legal action can use information as a lever for change. Local people's organisations, NGOs and pressure groups played important roles in both cases, as did linkages with allies in government, the media, and various professions.

Two case studies from Pakistan explore national-level advocacy efforts to open up space for greater participation of civil society and citizens in governance. In a context of entrenched military and authoritarian rule, Pakistani activists have taken steps to use the available legal and political processes to nurture democratic participation. Irfan Mufti describes the creative use of legislative advocacy to protect the rights of civil society organisations. Threatened with a proposed law that would limit their freedoms of association, expression and assembly, a core group of NGOs formed a national coalition to campaign against the law and to draft alternative legislation. The Pakistani NGO Forum (PNF) now represents more than 3500 organisations, and plays a pro-active role in defining the code of conduct and standards of accountability for NGOs. Its success in blocking draconian laws was due to a well-crafted and representative coalition, and to strategic alliances with the wider civil society, sympathetic politicians, and the media.

Rashida Dohad charts the story of another nation-wide advocacy effort in Pakistan, this time building on political space opened up by the government's devolution measures. The 'People's Assemblies' process was initiated in 1998 to provide a platform for normally excluded voices to debate and to be heard in shaping politics and decision making. Again taken forward by a nation-wide coalition of civil society organisations, a process of open debate on critical issues of governance was held in 40 locations nationwide. While far from perfect, the people's assemblies helped to revitalise a culture of debate, analysis, and popular participation in politics, and were remarkable for their creative efforts to ensure that women could participate – in one instance from behind a curtain.

Central America

Guatemala, like Pakistan, is attempting to emerge from an authoritarian past. But Paty Ardon provides a far less optimistic assessment of the possibilities of meaningful 'participation' in a context of extreme inequality and ethnic diversity. After decades of civil war, violence, and military rule the idea was to hold a 'national consultation' to reform the constitution, as a means of implementing the country's recent peace accords. This effort was

severely hampered, however, by Guatemala's immense social, economic, cultural, and linguistic differences, and by the limited rights and literacy of indigenous people. Ardon describes a flawed process in which the national referendum process was steered by political and economic elites, all in the name of participation. She highlights the weakness of a 'participatory' policy process that does NOT include strong elements of popular education, communication, and consciousness raising, and that fails to create an agenda rooted in public awareness, common demands, and organised political power.

East Africa

As participation is 'mainstreamed' by governments, often under pressure from bilateral donors and from the International Financial Institutions, new arenas of consultation have arisen with mixed results. The World Bank's requirement that countries develop Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) with broad 'stakeholder' participation has become a new form of conditionality for loans, with uncertain outcomes for marginalised people. Daoud Tari Abkula describes the experience of pastoralists in Kenya in their efforts to express their needs in the crafting of Kenya's PRSP. Pastoralists make up a fourth of the country's population, and are among the poorest, with little political influence. Yet they have strong traditional networks, and have mobilised these for a widespread and participatory needs assessment. Through advocacy and negotiation, many pastoralist priorities were ultimately reflected in the PRSP, which was approved and commended. Yet the World Bank never released its loans because other corruption issues were not being addressed. Abkula draws important lessons from both the hope and disappointment of pastoralist people as they engaged in this formal process of participation.

Southeast Asia

Indonesia is in a process of moving from authoritarian to democratic rule, and to more decentralised forms of governance. Nani Zulminarni sheds light on efforts to open space for women's participation in politics through the work of PPSW, a Jakarta-based women's NGO. She reveals the painstaking and long-term process that is required to strengthen women politically: this is the sort of advocacy that involves education, consciousness raising, and empowerment at the most basic and individual level. In effect, PPSW's strategies help women to change the way they think about themselves, and to analyse and understand gender relations at all levels of society from the household to national government. This critical awareness provides a foundation for organising, political education, and leadership; which in turn enables grassroots advocacy on women's issues. This transformative process demonstrates the way in which social values and attitudes must shift in order to confront 'invisible' power.

North America

Advocacy has a long and rich tradition in the United States, and US models and concepts of legislative advocacy have often been exported in a somewhat simplified pluralist form, with little effort to adjust them to the stark realities of political power, conflict, and risk in other countries. In reality, many US politics and citizen advocacy campaigns have also been messy and risk-prone, and have required multiple strategies to confront very real imbalances in power. Two case studies of US advocacy campaigns are included here. Valerie Miller describes a 15-year battle by a poor rural community to stop industrial pollution of their water supply, and reveals the multiple strategies used by the people of Yellow Creek to hold powerful government and corporate interests accountable. As in India, key elements of success included the uses of participatory research (including scientific research), freedom of information provisions, and the legal system, as well as strategic alliances and genuine partnerships with supportive and respectful NGOs.

David Cohen analyses a well-known but little-understood example of citizen advocacy in the US: the popular movement to stop the Vietnam War. Like Miller and many other authors in this issue, he shows that multiple strategies are often needed to create change. 'Protest and electoral politics alone are never enough,' Cohen concludes. 'Ongoing public education, organising and a variety of congressional actions were also key in building the force to end the war.' It was a mixture of street protests and political pragmatism – including alliances and deals with key politicians – that worked in the end.

Measuring and monitoring advocacy

NGOs and donors are increasingly putting their time, efforts and resources into citizen participation and advocacy efforts – recognising that ultimately it is political change, rather than projects, that will reduce poverty. As advocacy emerges as a major sector of programming – and funding – so too has the challenge of measuring and evaluating the impact of advocacy efforts. Jenny Chapman outlines ActionAid's 'work in progress' in exploring these monitoring and evaluation issues, and shares a useful framework for looking at possible outcomes and impacts of advocacy work. She explores some of the trade-offs inherent in advocacy work, where for example investment in capacities for 'professional' advocacy (to achieve quick policy results) may undermine efforts to enhance the direct voices and representation of marginalised people. There is also the risk that smaller civil society groups with limited resources may get 'squeezed out' of debates as larger organisations dominate advocacy campaigns. Chapman urges greater attention to the power dynamics within and among civil society groups, in order to safeguard transparency, legitimacy, representation, and participation in decision making.

Lessons learned

A number of important insights and lessons emerge from these examples of advocacy and citizen participation, and from the methods and strategies in the *Action Guide*. These insights were captured succinctly by the *Making Change Happen* workshop's participants in their concluding statement, part of which we include here:

- *Social transformation.* Advocacy for policy change is often disconnected from longer-term efforts for social and economic transformation. As a result, many new policies fail to be implemented and the impact on exclusion and poverty remains slight. For sustainable results, efforts to influence policies should be more closely connected to social change movements that build critical awareness, understandings of basic human rights and long-term visions of social change among citizens.

- *Understanding power.* There is a need to re-inject understandings of power and politics in mainstream advocacy work. Power must be addressed in its many dimensions, in its visible and hidden forms, and in its social and ideological facets, including divisions of class, caste, race, ethnicity, religion, age, and gender that lead to extremism and exclusion.

- *Strengthening capacities.* The capacity of civil society groups to engage in advocacy needs to be strengthened, including the ability to assess power and to decide whether, how and when to engage in the opportunities that arise for participation and engagement. In human rights work, there is a need to build the direct advocacy of marginalised groups, and to protect their rights to participate, to dissent, and to organise.

- *Active citizenship.* Active citizenship can only be claimed and defined by people as 'makers and shapers' of rights through their own processes of constituency building, advocacy, and change. The legal framework for citizen rights is important, but is not sufficient to ensure democratic participation. We are concerned that definitions of citizenship are often being imposed externally, both by states and by transnational institutions of power.

- *Accountable states.* In addition to active, democratic citizenship there is a need for effective, accountable, and proactive states that can advance and uphold social justice and equity goals. Such states must be effectively and continuously accountable to poor and excluded people, while providing transparent legal and administrative governance. The challenge of the politics of the new century is to build strong, responsive states combined with strong, responsive civil societies.

- *Rethinking global security.* In the aftermath of 11 September, global security has been defined increasingly as a political-military challenge, rather than one of ensuring basic economic needs and human rights. Yet it is clear that poverty, discrimination, and repression fuel cycles of violence and of fundamentalism. In some parts of the world, including the US, space for citizen expression and dissent appears to be narrowing. Yet debate about these issues is crucial to finding lasting solutions and is at the heart of citizenship. We need a vision of global security founded upon increasing equality and justice in the world, and upon the free and active involvement of all people in decisions which affect their lives.

Ways forward

Participants in the *Making Change Happen* workshop resolved to take action to address these diverse challenges. We now invite readers of this special issue of *PLA Notes* to reflect upon ways to deepen and strengthen commitment to more meaningful advocacy and citizen participation. We offer five priority areas of action identified in the workshop:

1. The development of *clear guidelines for engagement*. Using such guidelines, citizens and civil society groups can better decide when, whether, and how to engage in policy processes. To ensure accountability, we need to establish engagement strategies informed by our mandate and principles that include specifics on negotiable and non-negotiable items. We need to assess the opportunity costs for participation, and to develop mechanisms of validation, communication, and accountability.

2. Strategies which *link policy change efforts to strategies of social and economic transformation*. To be effective in reducing exclusion, poverty, and injustice, policy changes need to be reinforced by long-term social change efforts that challenge underlying power relations and that empower and strengthen marginalised groups within society. Such links will go a long way towards improving accountability and reducing the 'implementation gap'.

3. Greater *capacity building for civil society to engage in advocacy*. Stronger capacities are needed for power and risk analysis; for self-reflection; for accountability and representation; and for engagement, negotiation and collaboration with donors, governments, and the private sector. Capacities are also needed for developing longer-term visions and strategies in which advocacy is linked to wider empowerment objectives.

4. Broader ways of *defining and assessing success* in advocacy and citizen participation. Progress is often measured according to narrow, quantitative, and externally defined indicators. Systematic efforts are needed to develop alternative tools and methods which enable people to define their own indicators of success and to learn from their experience.

5. Attention to issues around *representation, legitimacy, and identity*. Both within organisations and groups, and across levels of advocacy activity, there is a need for greater accountability with regard to citizen voice. Particularly important is to address who legitimately speaks for whom at local, national, and global levels, and how those voices are held accountable.

In pursuing these issues there is a need for continued processes of documentation, analysis, and learning about effective strategies of advocacy and citizen participation. Similarly, there is a need to create and strengthen networks and linkages for sharing experiences and for mutual support, and to engage in dialogue in order to broaden definitions and understandings of advocacy, citizen participation, power, and social change. We invite you to join us in this endeavor to 'make change happen,' and to contact the authors and editors with your own views, case studies, and experiences of advocacy.

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