

Tools for Empowering the Marginalised

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An exposure visit to Pakuwa VDC, Parbat district, west Nepal as part of the ICIMOD Advocacy Project

One of the myths about advocacy is that this is an NGO business to disturb government machinery. We try to overcome this misconception, which we face everyday, as we work with our partners in the ICCO-supported ICIMOD Advocacy Strategy project in the mountains of the Himalayas.

Advocacy was first practiced among civil society groups, but in reality the concept is equally important and useful for government. The governance of a country is only as good as its contact and adequate responses to the needs and wishes of its citizens. Advocacy offers ways for the government apparatus to be closer to the citizens' desires and problems, but also closer to identifying joint solutions to pressing problems. Good governance must not only be perceived as donor-driven, but as a unifying aim for the development of an equitable society.

National governments need to apply the same advocacy strategies at the international level (often called diplomacy) that civil society organisations use. Government officials face international forums and deal with UN organisations, bilateral and multilateral donors, international financial institutions, and multinational companies that are, in many cases, stronger, more influential and powerful than they are in shaping the destiny of people of their countries (SANSAD 2006). In circumstances of negotiation and bargaining, the government needs to carry out a strong and meaningful

advocacy campaign to protect the rights and interests of the country. The level and gravity of advocacy and its actors may vary, but the processes of dealing with issues remain the same.

Advocacy provides tools by which arguments for change may be made more logical. Experiences in building capacity in advocacy strategies in the Himalayan region indicate that some groups, wittingly or unwittingly, propagated the myth about advocacy by misunderstanding the concept and misusing the term for various other purposes. In the best possible case, these misconceived notions may be overcome through a clarity of the concept among all actors.

Issues for advocacy

Advocacy is a relatively new concept which was first practiced in the development arena. As part of the rights-based approach it functions as a tool to protect individual and group rights which have been denied by other actors. Good governance is closely linked to the rights-based approach, which argues that development

is a process of realising fundamental human rights and freedoms (UNP 2002). Their absence in the community calls for a need for advocacy to attain these essential elements in a respectful manner.

The first and crucial step is to identify the appropriate topic and scale of an issue up for advocacy. In connection with the rights-based approach a differentiation between the scale or magnitude of the problem is important. Using the tree as a symbol (see Fig.), it is possible to distinguish between visible symptoms (e.g., the dying branches of the tree) and the root cause for such problems (the rotten roots of the tree). Mountain people today are often marginalised because of problems deeply rooted within social and political systems. Service delivery projects focus on mitigating the symptoms by aiming to provide relief for those who are presently suffering from various problems. Advocacy in the rights-based context tries to address the root causes of poverty and marginalisation, like access to rights and services, and not poverty itself.

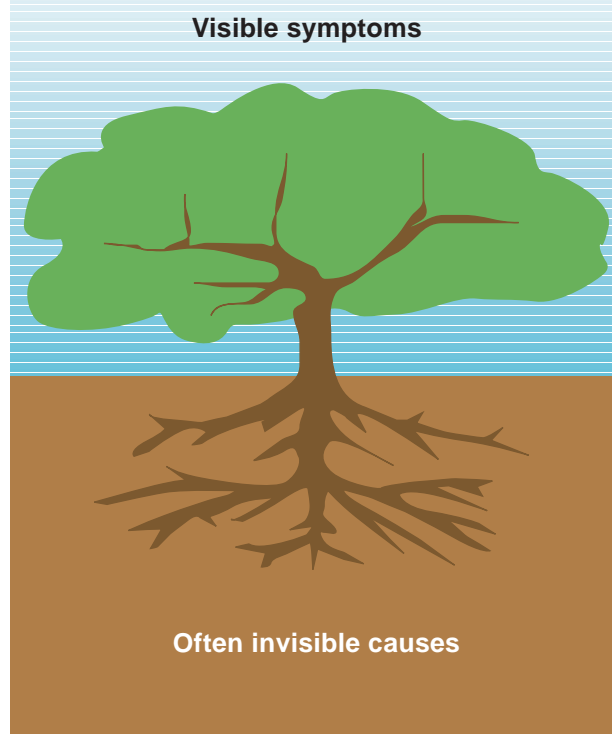
Clearly, not all root causes (like the roots of a tree) are equal in size and importance. It is necessary to balance between the gravity of a cause and the capability of the initiator to bring changes. A small CBO can identify a genuine root cause but may not be in the position to address it. Advocacy cannot be effective in bringing changes to the communities in such a case. However, if a particular agency does not have the capability to deal with the bigger root cause, an option would be to address several smaller causes linked to the main cause so the main cause can at least be weakened step-by-step and changed later on (DFID 2001).

There are many cases where development agents identify and start advocacy campaigns for change addressing all root causes at the same time, and they fail because the consequent drastic changes in the society are not manageable. Applying the advocacy concept properly can help avoid such mistakes (Tondon 2002).

Peaceful and structured advocacy

Advocacy can serve as a tool to achieve changes in a constructive, constitutional, and peaceful manner. Confrontation should be avoided and used only as a last option. Past lessons indicate that non governmental and community-based organisations and their networks in mountain areas are able to advocate better by bringing the issues in the sphere of public debate, to exert greater influence in local, national, and regional policies.

Analysing the problem



Under this changed context, civil society organisations can play important roles in influencing state and market mechanisms, to hold them accountable to the people they are supposed to serve.

Support of civil society in the mountain areas is among the most effective ways to enhance democratisation and good governance. One of the key focuses of civil society is to empower its constituency by undertaking lawful, people-oriented advocacy to safeguard people's rights. It is necessary to create an environment of trust and to acknowledge civil society's role in representing citizens' voices. It goes without saying that civil society organisations also have to follow transparent, participatory, inclusive, and accountable governance structures.

The process of issue-based advocacy should follow a structured approach, exemplified by a set of questions that public advocates should answer before starting advocacy initiatives (see Box, p. 26). If public advocates can answer all of the questions posed, they can define the road map for expected changes.

**Advocacy offers a set of tools
for improving governance.**

Questions to raise while taking up advocacy causes

What do we want? (*goals*)

What is the audience expected to do after hearing the advocacy message?

Who can bring the changes? (*target audiences*)

Which segment of the public is in the best position to hear and act effectively upon the advocacy message? (Note that the 'general public' is too general to be a target audience.)

What do they need to hear? (*messages*)

What language and use of words will best impact policy makers (or whoever is the target audience) in a powerful way and motivate them to take action?

Who do policy makers need to hear the message from? (*messengers*)

Who is this particular target audience most likely to listen to and believe?

How can advocates get policy makers to hear the message? (*delivery*)

What is the best medium to reach policy makers (or your target audience). Is it print, radio, television, email, others?

What are the strengths of the advocates? (*resources, personal qualities, coalition they belong to, others*)

What resources do advocates already have at their disposal (good messages, graphic artists, websites, specialists, motivating speakers, among others) that can help them achieve their advocacy goal?

What do the advocates need to develop further? (*challenges and gaps*)

Who do they need to bring into the coalition? What skills do advocates need which they do not have at present? What organisational culture or issues might hamper their efforts?

How to begin? (*step-by-step planning and division of roles*)

What are some things that the advocates can do right away to get the effort moving forward? What will they have to do afterwards?

How will advocates know that advocacy is working? (*periodic monitoring and evaluation*)

What mechanisms will the advocates have to put in place to measure the impact of their message and approach?

Conclusions

Advocacy offers a set of tools for improving governance. However, advocacy efforts will not be purposeful without first analysing problems and root causes. Advocacy should not be perceived as an individual activity; the concept argues that all development interventions must address the root causes of problems and should be able to reduce some of these causes, along with immediate relief, by reducing some of the symptoms. Working with the symptoms entails less risks, and is timely and produces easily measurable outputs to report to the donors. But they are not often sustainable. Working on root causes may be more sustainable, but it is not practical from the humanitarian point of view because poor people cannot wait very long for better livelihood options. When projects start working with the root causes of the problems, it is more challenging, more risky, more likely to be 'political', and interventions should go beyond the timeframe set by donors or development agencies. Therefore, bringing service delivery and advocacy together is the most challenging of tasks.

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