ADVOCACY GUIDE

A Guide to Effective Grassroots Advocacy

eucord network

Background

The original short guide to Advocacy, which was published in November 2023, was met with great enthusiasm and sparked a desire from our members for more guides on various topics. As a result, this is the second in a series of short guides focusing on different topics. As a diverse network of 26 NGOs working in 87 countries and with over 800 national civil society counterparts, we work on multiple themes in humanitarian and development settings. This guide advocates for an advocacy approach that is bottom-up and rooted in the strengths of local partners and communities. Hence, this document is an informative guide for members to support individual member advocacy efforts and localise advocacy strategies and approaches.

Understanding Grassroots Advocacy

Grassroots movements work towards strengthening governance within a community, which would decrease centralised power. Grassroots organisations are groups of people pursuing shared interests, mainly on a volunteer and not-for-profit basis. Often, such organisations are formed by activists in social movements. Many are closely linked to communities and local concerns and represent rights holders. Organisations play a crucial role in advocating for social and policy change. They engage in advocacy from the ground up by mobilising their communities to harness collective power.

Effective advocacy empowers grassroots advocates to shape public debate on critical social issues. Grassroots advocacy builds and organises public support locally to achieve policy goals by relying on strength in numbers before extending to regional, national, and sometimes international levels. Grassroots advocacy is rooted in the needs and priorities of the people and communities we serve and ensures that their voices can be raised and heard on matters that affect them (i). To do this requires recognising the unique knowledge of local actors and rights holders as experts in their own context.

This type of advocacy works better with a bottom-up approach rather than a top-down approach.

What is the Bottom-Up Approach to Advocacy?

Bottom-up advocacy focuses on a central problem that has the potential to mobilise people. It highlights the importance of grassroots movements and organised civil society. This approach helps identify local problems and chalks out local innovative strategies and methods to mitigate these (ii). Bottom-up advocacy taps into the indigenous knowledge bases and local expertise. It synthesises and systematises the lessons learned and disseminates them among the masses (iii). The contention is that the people should be aware of their problems and share the responsibility for the benefit of their community and locality. In this type of advocacy, the experts can be found within the community (rights holders) instead of relying on external expertise divorced from the local context and reality.

Acknowledging the power and influence of International NGO's within the global space requires that we see ourselves as having a facilitating role, serving as "gate openers" to the institutions, spaces, and conversations where political decisions are made (iv).

In contrast, the top-down approach refers to a method where directives and decisions cascade from the head offices of INGOs or higher-level branches and filter down through the organisational structure. Advocacy strategies and campaigns are primarily created far from the context where the advocacy will occur. While a bottom-up approach emphasises local decision-making, community participation and grassroots mobilisation/movements, the top-down approach focuses on lobbying and bargaining with the decision-making authorities such as government and multilateral agencies.

How does Grassroots Advocacy differ from other types of Advocacy?

A grassroots advocacy campaign has two distinguishing features (v).

1. **It mobilises masses** (ordinary everyday citizens/rights holders) to participate in a particular cause/campaign.
2. **The communication directly speaks to every individual in the campaign**: Door-to-door canvassing, SMS, phone calls, and emails are usually how every member is contacted. Mass communication tools like TV, radio, and newspapers are not used.

In grassroots advocacy, external allies such as international NGO funders and others take a backseat while those in the given context drive the process. They identify needs and issues and plan and implement advocacy efforts and programming. This enables them to mobilise many people to drive the agenda effectively.

To achieve grassroots mobilisation, you need:

- **Collective Action**

Grassroots mobilisation uses collective action (at the local level) to influence outcomes at the national level. The 'outcome' is typically a cause or a change that the community wants. If the local political body or policymaker opposes that outcome, the community works together to get its voice heard and effect that change.

- **Collective Leadership**

Another aspect of grassroots mobilisation is that it is powered by collective leadership. Every single member of the community is equally invested and equally responsible for the cause. They all participate to the extent they can to accomplish what they have set out to do as rights holders. This power of equality that grassroots mobilisation brings to policy issues and the community is instrumental in making every single member give their best and take ownership.

Preparing for Grassroots Advocacy

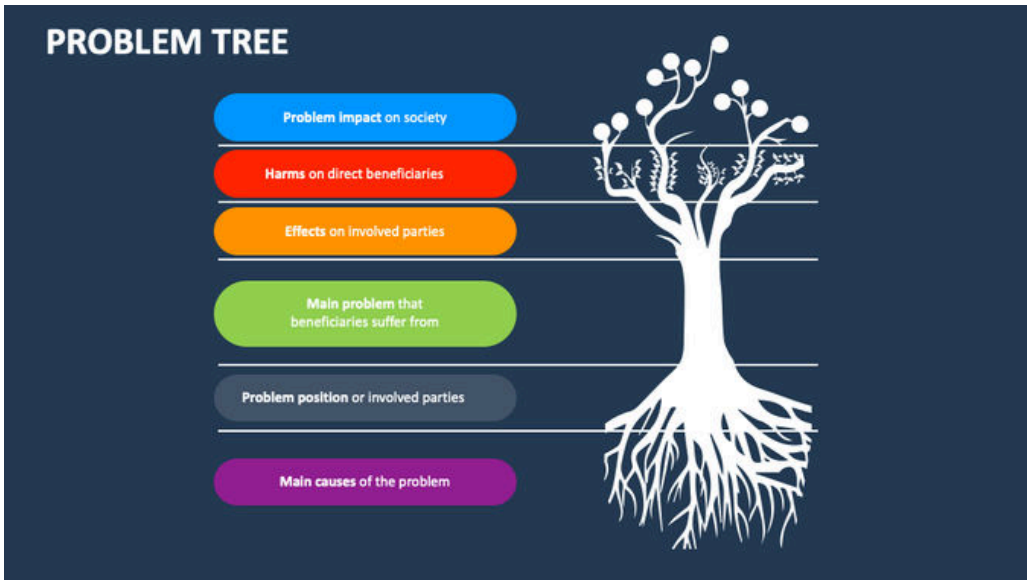
1. Identify the Cause you want to address

It is essential to differentiate between the problem and the root cause of the problem (vi). For example:

> *Say you want to clean the rivers in your town. The problem statement would be about the "dirty rivers." However, the root cause of the problem is either pollution from mining industries, lack of legislation by the government, or the inefficiency of the Local Government in cleaning it up. So, you would first do your research to narrow down the root cause you want to tackle. For instance, you would want mining companies to stop polluting the rivers in your community.*

Narrowing down the root cause will determine your campaign strategy. Will you protest with your supporters outside the mining company's headquarters to stop the dumping and/or try to get a legal bill passed that makes such dumping illegal, thereby targeting policymakers in parliament?

Using a problem tree helps find solutions by mapping out the cause and effect of an issue to find the root cause. The example below shows how a problem can be broken down into manageable and definable chunks to find the root cause (vii). This enables a more evident prioritisation of factors and helps focus objectives.



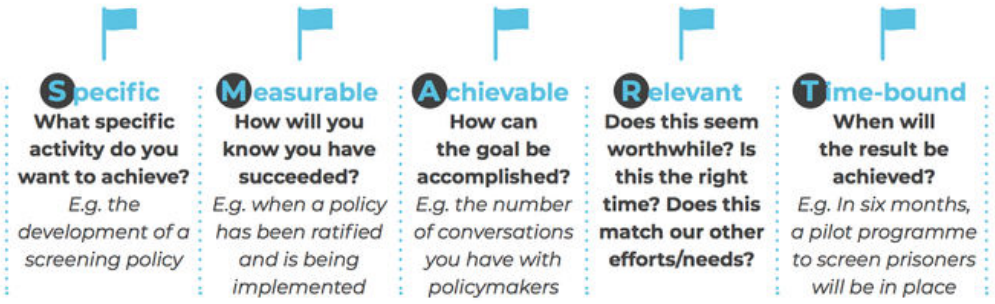
2. Plan and create goals

Grassroots advocacy is often more helpful when you want to create awareness around an identified problem concerning a community, when there is existing visibility on your issue but not enough community support, or when you want to work locally to affect decisions made nationally. However, this is not an exhaustive list, and one should always consider community advocacy where possible.

Creating goals is also critical to tackling the advocacy issue you have identified. These goals can be divided into three categories: long-term, intermediate, and short-term. Breaking larger issues into smaller winnable components allows you to track progress and encourage the communities you will work with.

- Long-term goals: These may extend beyond the particular campaign you are working on and are in addition to your final outcomes.
- Intermediate goals: The intermediate goals are the issues you want to win in this campaign. These are the final outcomes you are working towards.
- Short-term goals: Short-term goals are steps towards your intermediate goals. These will be activities necessary to build on to achieve the final outcomes.

Using the SMART abbreviation model to set goals for your advocacy campaign is useful.



3. Determine Roles

Now that you have identified the issue and established goals, it is time to decide on your role as an INGO (viii).

There are three options available in respect of the roles you can take:

- Create platforms for rightsholders to advocate independently: This means using your influence to secure access to spaces of influence where rights holders use their voice to address the problem and advocate for the desired solutions.
- Advocate with rightsholders: In this role, you will stand on the side of rights holders to advocate for a desired change. The community is still driving the process; you are a critical ally.
- Advocate on behalf of rightsholders: In a context of shrinking democratic space or humanitarian crisis, it might be difficult for rightsholders to speak on their own. Then, you need to take their place and, based on their analysis and suggestions, advocate on their behalf. You are not replacing the community advocacy but merely being a conduit for their voices; thus, you must attempt to ensure your message aligns with the rightsholders as much as possible.

4. Recruit supporters/ volunteers

The next step in your grassroots advocacy would be to create awareness about your campaign and get some interest from the community. Make people aware of their power to win concrete improvements in people's lives. Community members should believe that this is a cause where they can raise their voices and be heard. Hence, you need to ensure you have adequate outreach material.

To do this:

- Create a compelling message. Whether your issue only impacts a few people or is something your entire community experiences, your messages should work to get as many people invested in your cause as possible. You can create a focused, clearly explained, and relevant message (ix).
- Provide accessible educational materials. Many people in the targeted community may be aware of or even impacted by your issue but don't know the details behind it. Ensure your organisation has various educational resources that are freely available and accessible to those who are differently abled. The material should explain your issue, why it is important, and why your plan is the best course of action.
- Present immediate next steps. What action do you want community members to take after engaging with a message from your advocacy group? Whenever you create a message to rally support, include an actionable next step at the end.

Communication plays a key role here. Door-to-door canvassing and face-to-face conversations with people in the community will significantly help. Use a local medium of communication that is popular in that area. It could be a radio show, a community theatre production or community meetings.

To get buy-in for the advocacy campaign, people should see it as affecting all of them. In addition, the people recruited need to be convinced that the campaign's outcome will benefit the community as a whole, so every member has to step up and take action—which means collective leadership is the best option.

4. Work with Community Leaders

It is critical that you work with Community leaders. Community leaders are the most influential within the community you choose. Local leadership is key if we are to make development interventions contextually relevant, sustainable, and deeply rooted in the priorities and requirements of the communities (x). Working with community leaders will also improve your chances of recruiting supporters, per point 2 above. Either train the community leaders to lead some of your activities, have them in your grassroots committees or collaborate with them to carry on your campaign message. The changes you advocate and the measures you put forth will all be accepted more quickly if a community leader also endorses them.

These community leaders do not necessarily need to be a part of your grassroots committee (though it is highly recommended that they are). Still, you should recognise and treat them like you would a consulting partner working with you toward the same goal. Religious leaders, local political office holders, and the village figurehead are all examples of community leaders who can help you.

5. Partner with Local Organisations

It is advisable to seek support and/or collaboration with like-minded organisations. Find out who else is working on this issue in the community and plan to engage with them face-to-face. These like-minded organisations could be Faith-Based Organisations (FBOs), non-faith-affiliated Nonprofit Organisations (NGOs), universities, and even businesses. You could ask for a speaking slot during their events or be present at any events they organise to give you visibility and build your supporters and message through those avenues.

6. Implement your plan of action

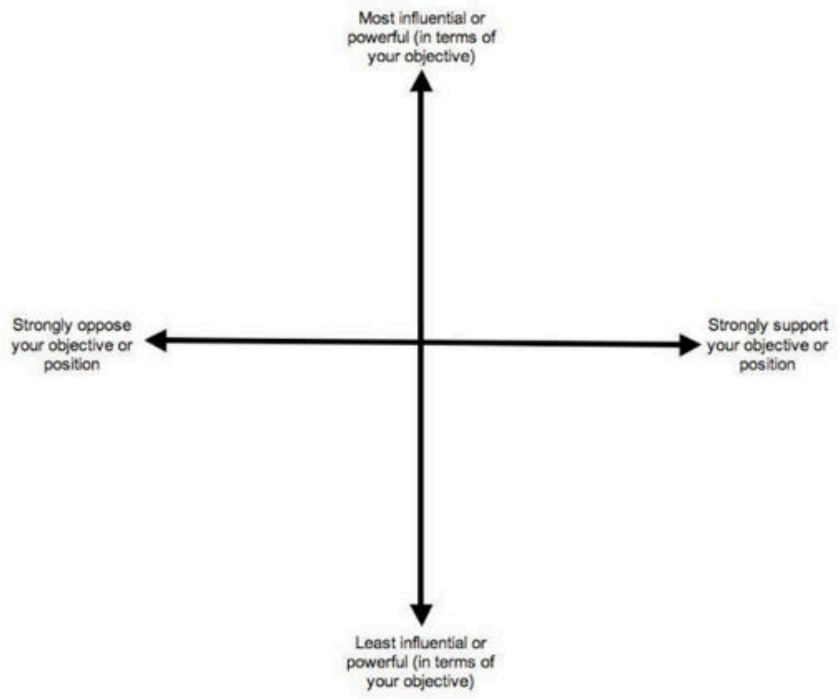
- Power Analysis requires examining the people involved in a process and their type of power and mapping interrelationships and sources of influence.

Types of Power

1. People - multitudes wield power when they act in a coordinated way, such as when voting or boycotting products or events.
2. Relational - people with access to and influence over other people with power, e.g. assistants or decision-makers relations.
3. Financial - people who control the disbursement of public money or use money to influence decisions, such as through political donations.
4. Positional power - people who wield power by virtue of their position

- Elected officials
- Heads of local, national and regional bodies, parastatals or companies relevant to your cause
- Agency directors

Use the Power axis on the next page to brainstorm names of organised stakeholders and influencers.



The stakeholder names should be assigned on the axis according to their levels of influence and whether they support your goals. Those who are very influential and support your goals will be in the top right part of the axis. Those who are influential but oppose your goals will be in the top left. You will also have those who are supportive but have little power (bottom right) and those who oppose you and have minimum power (bottom left).

- Activities: Once you have identified the relevant stakeholder based on their positions, your action in the form of activities can be more targeted.

The activities could include conducting rallies, outdoor events, in-house focus groups, and educational sessions, which may involve the stakeholders from the power analysis. The context within which the activities will be conducted can determine what can be feasibly done to effect change. Regardless of which you choose, the key to successful implementation is communication.
To increase your supporters' participation, use the most appropriate form of communication with them, along with venue details. This could be via SMS, WhatsApp, radio programmes, social media, or even newspapers. You could also host community events and invite stakeholders who support and oppose your goal. Your event might include a group outreach effort, with attendees contacting local decision-makers. Events can also double as fundraising opportunities. Regardless of your chosen activities, implementing your action plan in unison with community stakeholders is essential.

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Monitoring Grassroots Advocacy

Monitoring grassroots advocacy is crucial for assessing its effectiveness, making adjustments and demonstrating stakeholder impact. There are several strategies to monitor grassroots advocacy, which include, amongst others:

- Tracking participation numbers: You can monitor how many people attend meetings or events, listen to radio shows or online webinars or engage with you on social media.
- Surveys: During and after the advocacy campaign, you can conduct surveys with those who participated in and outside the community to help identify what worked and what didn't.
- Analyse policy and legislative changes: Though it is difficult to prove that your advocacy campaign directly influenced a change in policy (unless you are informed of this), it is still useful to monitor any changes in policy and legislation relating to your advocacy campaign.

Conclusion

Advocacy is no longer a technical process that includes only people with a technical understanding of an issue or problem. However, grassroots advocacy is not a mere strategy to get consent or build consensus; it includes sharing power, responsibilities, and accountability, thus promoting solidarity. It requires recognising that those most affected by an issue should be part of the journey to find a solution.

References

(i) LM International's Approach to Advocacy from March 2024.
(ii) Biswambhar Panda," Top Down or Bottom Up? A Study of Grassroots NGOs' Approach" Journal of Health Management (2007) 9(2)p.257 at 261.
(iii) As above.
(iv) Also adapted from LM International's Approach to Advocacy from March 2024.
(v) Lakshmi Narayanan, "Grassroots Mobilization: Enabling ordinary people to effect extraordinary changes: Here's how It Works" (2022) available at Grassroots Mobilization: Your First Guide To Spark Change (callhub.io).
(vi) The following points are adapted from Grassroots Mobilization: Your First Guide To Spark Change (callhub.io), as above.
(vii) Problem tree adapated from an emaple on Collidu available at Problem Tree PowerPoint Presentation Slides - PPT Template (collidu.com).
(viii) Adapted from the LM International Approach to Advocacy from March 2024.
(ix) Grassroots Unwired "Community Advocacy: The Complete Guide to Mobilize Change" available at Community Advocacy: The Complete Guide to Mobilize Change - Grassroots Unwired.
(x) See UNHCR (2021). Evaluation of UNHCR's Engagement in Humanitarian-Development Cooperation. https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/legacy-pdf/61af7be94.pdf.