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WHAT IS ADVOCACY

The rapid growth of advocacy training in the last decade has generated a wide variety of definitions, approaches and strategies. Diverse advocacy approaches are not just different ways of reaching a similar end. They embody different values, political views and goals, and thus seek different ends. The distinctions have important implications for excluded groups such as women, indigenous communities, and ethnic minorities. Advocacy initiatives concerned with empowerment, citizenship, and participation appear different from those that focus only on policy reform. Some definitions of advocacy refer to policy change or the technical aspects of advocacy while others explicitly refer to power. Some focus on who does advocacy and who is meant to benefit from advocacy.

There is no pure form of advocacy. Most advocacy strategies include aspects of several of the following definitions. At the same time, different definitions reflect different assumptions about how politics and power operate, and how change happens. Some of the influential advocacy definitions include:

Public interest advocacy: This is typically large-scale campaign-style advocacy often involving professional lobbyists, media experts, pollsters and fundraisers. These actors mobilize resources and influence in pursuit of policy reforms on social and political issues with the goal of serving the broad public interest.

Policy advocacy: Policy advocacy initiatives focus exclusively on the policy agenda and a specific policy goal. These advocates usually assume that policy change will produce real change on the ground.

Social justice advocacy: A number of organizations worldwide describe their advocacy this way. Strategies involve political and policy influence around issues that directly affect people's lives, especially the lives of the poor and marginalized. Oxfam and the Advocacy Institute (USA) describe it like this: "Advocacy consists of organized efforts and actions based on the reality of 'what is.' These organized actions seek to highlight critical issues that have been ignored and sub-merged, to influence public attitudes and to enact and implement laws and public policies so that visions of 'what should be' in a just, decent society become a reality." They stress the need "to embrace power relationships and people's participation."

People-centered advocacy: These strategies aim to empower poor people to

advocate for their rights and interests themselves. This approach challenges the notion that policy is the terrain of “experts.” For ActionAid (UK), people-centered advocacy “supports and enables people to better negotiate on their own behalf, for basic needs and basic rights.

Participatory Advocacy: Participatory advocacy extends the boundaries of public decision-making by engaging civil society groups in policy debates. It is founded on the belief that democratic governance is the task of citizens as well as governments. This type of advocacy aims to expand public space and citizenship. (Also see the discussion on deliberative democracy in the next chapter.)

WHY DOES ADVOCACY MATTER?

To summarize it in a word: impact. Many studies of effective organizations find that high-impact organizations may start out providing great programs, but they eventually realize that they cannot achieve large-scale social change through service delivery alone. They come to realize the importance of changing the root causes that underly the social issue they are trying to address. So they add advocacy to multiply their ability to improve the lives of those they serve. And the more they serve and advocate, the more they achieve impact. Their advocacy increases awareness of the issue they are trying to address and increases the number of people or organizations who can help. This can have the added advantage of helping an organization gain credibility, and acquire funding for expansion.