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Reflections on Advocacy in Africa

Working Paper 4

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This working paper is the fourth of a series (see below) which have been written in conjuncture with a resource pack *Critical Webs of Power and Change: A resource pack for planning, reflection and learning in people-centred advocacy*.

Between 2002 and 2005 Action Aid International supported action research initiatives by community groups, coalitions, NGOs and social movements from Brazil, Ghana, Nepal and Uganda working on land rights, women's rights, housing rights and *Dalit* rights. This work was funded by the Department for International Development (DfID), Comic Relief and ActionAid International.

These efforts were aimed at developing a better understanding of how change and advocacy happens in different places and circumstances and how planning, reflection and learning can better support the changes that we want - changes that are advancing the rights and leadership of the poor and marginalised and transforming power relations. These working papers are one output of this action research. They represent the views of the authors and are not official ActionAid policy or positions.

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Reflections on Advocacy in Africa

By Jane Ocaya Irama

"Society can only develop with the mobilisation of its people. Therefore, Africa needs to set in motion a process that puts the individual at the very centre of a development effort that is both human and humane, without necessarily softening the discipline that goes with development and enhances the human personality. Such a development process would not alienate the African from their society and culture but rather develop their self-confidence and identify their interest with that of their society, thereby strengthening their capacity and desire for self-reliance."
Prof Adebayo Adedeji[1]

Introduction

Development is an enigma often described from the socio-economic and political perspective in terms of improved livelihoods, and more recently as a concept of freedom (Sen, 1999). Development in Africa has also been described both in terms of greater control and choice of how people live as well as greater democracy. In this context, in 1989, 39 out of the 45 Sub-Saharan African countries had authoritarian forms of rule, but by 1995, 31 of the 45 had democratic presidential or parliamentary elections (UN, 1996). NGOs have been an important factor in the change processes taking place on the continent. For now, in addition to their previous role as poverty alleviators, emergency and humanitarian aid providers; NGOs are an important vehicle for empowerment, democratisation and economic development (Dicklitch, 1998).

With the advent of the rights-based approach, advocacy is increasingly propelled as a successful strategy employed by civil society to influence policy makers and the development agenda. However, until the recent process initiated by ActionAid International, to develop and share innovative tools and methodologies for assessing the impact of participatory policy-making and people-centred advocacy initiatives, insufficient work had been undertaken into the intricacies which exist in approaches

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[1] Onimode et al, 2004

and context towards advocacy across the globe. In the same way that the concept of 'one-size fits all' policy prescriptions meted out to developing countries by the International Financial Institutions are proven failures, there is no 'one-size fits all' approach to advocacy; but a growing recognition that civil society must understand various factors – from historical perspectives and constructs to socio-economic and political context in order to re-construct power relations from a people-centred perspective in Africa.

This paper attempts to draw analyses of development strategy from an African perspective. The paper re-affirms advocacy as an overall strategy for development and suggests that a 'home-grown' approach to advocacy in Africa is the key to development of Africa and her peoples and ultimately the eradication of poverty on the continent.

Context

Socio-economic

Four out of every ten people in Africa live below the poverty line. This is a reality very much re-affirmed in the lives of men, women and children on the continent. It is also a contradiction for a continent, which has a vast amount of wealth; that wealth and opulence live alongside poverty and deprivation. However, while Africa is a potentially wealthy land, it is also extremely vulnerable. The vast savannas and natural soils are features which require controlled exploitation. Tensions now exist between people and the environment. For, rather than previous co-existence, communities are currently pushed to the periphery of areas now allotted for game reserves, national parks and large farms. Inevitably, their lives become threatened. In this kind of scenario, potential class and group conflicts simply become inevitable. The image of Africa as a land of ethnic and other conflicts, then, appears extremely fearsome (Mataze, 2003).

Historical

Prof Peter Kanyandago, a renowned African anthropologist, notes that you cannot understand Africa's present and future unless you come to grips with her past. Colonialism wrecked havoc on the continent and nipped her natural development process in the bud. Artificial boundaries created nation-states that literally divided

brother and sister into the citizenry of different countries. Resources were pilfered[2], culture and its symbols were destroyed, and the confidence of the people was muted through the slave-trade. Further, the cooperation of some leaders with the slave traders and colonialists also proved to be further divisive and detrimental. This remains an age old concern.

Colonialism also brought with it new cultures, languages and religion which further divided the people. Unlike Latin America, which basically had two colonial powers – the Spanish and Portuguese, therefore two new cultures (albeit similar) and two foreign languages introduced, Africa had a plethora of 'colonial masters' – the British, French, Portuguese, Dutch, Spanish, Italians, Belgians and Germans, each with its own particular approach to socialisation and development. The post-colonial period in Africa, has therefore seen efforts towards building the nation state, as well as sub-regional and regional coherence on the shaky foundation of various 'phones'- Anglophonic, Francophonic, Lusophonic, among others. Sometimes this foundation proves too insecure to support the structures it should, resulting into state collapse as is evident in the Congo and Somalia among other states.

The liberation movements which emerged on the continent largely in the 1950's were a key milestone in mobilising people around political issues to determine their own development. This culminated in the independence of several African countries from colonial rule largely in the 1950's and 60's.

Political

Africa has been divided. It has been difficult for Africans to take a common stand because of the history above and due to continued power struggles, and the defeat and humiliation resulting from this disunity have not shocked Africans into necessary action yet (Mangeni, 2004). The nature of disunity is multi-faceted. Persistent cleavages arise from ethnic violence; leadership continues to fragment Africa and her peoples. While efforts are made to move forward, there are the occasional steps taken backward often brought on by a leadership which loses sight of the common good. Class interests are quite evident here often times with a ruling elite subjugating the rights of the people in the name of the people.

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[2] The Congo became the private property of King Leopold II of Belgium in 1897

Internal strife with both endogenous and exogenous factors, is rampant on the continent, with Africa, a continent of 800 million people hosting close to 50% of the world's refugees and internally displaced persons. The African Union with a fresh mandate to engage in the internal affairs of member countries has a new impetus to shift from a reactive to a proactive approach and address the leadership and governance challenges on the continent.

Advocacy as a tool for Sustainable Development

In recent years, advocacy has been recognised as a powerful tool that can bring about change in the lives of men, women and children through addressing the unequal power relations, which exist in society. Power relations in the African context are manifested in various ways, from the household level where the balance is tipped in favour of men and the boy child who is, for instance, privileged to study as opposed to the girl child most of whom do not complete the primary school cycle; to the national and international arenas where the holders of power are a political elite, often closely linked to the military and big business.

However, in our analysis of power we need to recognise that there are a number of factors, which contribute to this. These factors include:
- Cultural implications and dimensions
- Socio-economic factors
- Historical factors including colonisation
- The nature of governance and militarization

Even where strides are made in accessing power, control remains elusive. For instance, in Uganda, although women members of Parliament represent 24.7% of the legislature, there has been minimal progress in the enactment of specific laws to address women's rights, for instance, a legal framework on domestic relations[3]. Limited support exists from women Parliamentarians; indicative of the fact that numbers and gender alone do not necessarily ensure voice but must be augmented by the understanding of how those numbers can be used to generate change; that

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[3] The original Bill on Domestic Relations was introduced in the Parliament of Uganda in 1964 and a renewed effort to have it enacted began in 1995

transformation of '*power over*' to '*power with*' and, even more fundamentally, ensuring that both women and men in leadership do not lose sight of those to whom they are accountable. The process of this change cannot be generated exogenously but must be responsive to local circumstances and an awareness of people-centred power.

Communication

Africa remains the single region in the world with the greatest limitation in terms of communication infrastructure – ICT coverage is only significant in South Africa but remains obsolete in the rest of the continent. Whole communities are virtually kept in a web of isolation. Further, new and fast-growing means of communication such as the mobile phone and internet are extremely costly in Africa as compared to other continents. This greatly impacts on advocacy efforts in the region; for effective communication is the cornerstone of a good advocacy campaign. Compare Africa's communication coverage with Asia, which has fast become the ICT hub of the south and the extent to which this coverage has facilitated that continent's ability to effectively communicate from the most remote communities to the national and international level on events that take place on the continent. However, one must acknowledge that the growing network of community-based radio stations are playing a critical role in dialogue and information-sharing in poor communities. Although, much more needs to be done. Due to various factors, many communities in Africa adopt approaches to advocacy that will not isolate them further but enhance their ability to address an issue within the existing context, that is, confrontation is less used than persuasive collaboration. This may be due to the strong belief in co-operation and avoiding conflict as well as the unequal interdependence of connected lives.

Strategies and Approaches

A key factor one must consider in relation to advocacy in Africa is the extent of local content, approaches and solutions. While society is dynamic and it is therefore important to share global experiences, it is equally or more important to consider an endogenous approach for sustainability. However, if the purpose is for a short-term quick-fix solution then a different approach may be considered. Consider the case of

the controversy meted out over the play, the *Vagina Monologues* in Uganda.[4] The purpose of the play was to bring out the magnitude of the different types of sexual violence women suffer and raise peoples' awareness on sexual violence against women. This was basically through interviews of women from 133 countries sharing their experiences of sexual violence. While the Uganda Media Council erred in its decision to ban this play and therefore denied the opportunity to many to actually watch it, questions were raised in the public particularly on the title of the play. In particular, the assertion that the same content and title have been used across the globe called for clarification. For, while civil society organisations (CSOs) in Africa focusing on Information and Communication have continually called for the generation of more local content on information and communication materials made available to people across the continent, one can use the same argument and question whether the play could not be performed with variations based on local, as well as global, content, experiences and context. Was it by omission or rather commission that this was presented as 'the way' the play was to be performed or, 'a way' the play could be presented, leaving room for variations.

An effective strategy on advocacy in Africa has been the use of traditional approaches to find solutions to existing problems. This method has been largely used in conflict resolution. Although it is recognised that traditional approaches do have their limitations, particularly in their suppression of women's rights, they are still widely accepted by communities and can therefore be moulded into an effective advocacy tool. Evidence of this exists in the peace process in Burundi where traditional leaders were recognised as key actors. Looking back to traditional approaches is not an attempt to return to the past, but rather, to look to those principles, attitudes and moralities of controlling and sharing power in community that brought success when they were applied and left failure when they were not.

Consider the mediation approach undertaken by the Uganda Land Alliance and CEDEP in Ghana in which the community plays a key role. In the case of the ULA among the Benet community; mediation is achieved through community structures and facilitated by trained paralegals. However, mediation needs to be done taking

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[4] The play was to be staged in Kampala, Uganda on February 19th but was banned by the Uganda Media Council.

power into account so instead of treating both parties exactly the same some prior work and support is done with the person less able to stand up for their rights (eg the woman in land or domestic violence cases). Otherwise, there is a danger of the mediation process just reinforcing existing injustices.

In preparation and during the 4th WTO Ministerial Conference in Cancun, Mexico, in September 2003, CSOs in Africa worked very closely with national governments to ensure an outcome to the meeting that would positively impact on the lives of men, women and children in Africa. In fact, CSOs were present on official delegations of the countries of: Burkina Faso, Kenya, Malawi, Senegal, Tanzania and Uganda among others. This raised criticism from CSOs in other regions as well as social movements on the need to maintain a critical space between governments and NGOs. However, one must recognise the fact that power is not equal between the northern and southern governments in these and several other policy-making forums. Supporting effective southern government engagement in forums that are dominated by the North is perfectly valid as a strategy to work for more democratic governance at a global level.

Alliances and coalitions can greatly enhance social justice advocacy by bringing together the strength and resources of diverse groups to create a more effective force for change. While several issue and sector specific Alliances and Coalitions have been formed/ are being formed across the region; many are still in their nascent stages and have to transcend various institutional and political challenges; including defining the relationship with International NGOs. Among these include: Africa Trade Network (Trade and Economic Justice), ANCEFA (Education), and AWEPON (Gender, Trade and Economic Justice). While these organisations have individually and collectively made headway in joint action on specific issues impacting on poverty across the continent, they still face major challenges in enhancing cohesion and collaboration of diverse actors. Global events such as the World Social Forum in which Africa has gained more visibility due to collective action of the many as well as individual efforts of the few, are a testimony to the potential benefits of greater collaboration through alliances and coalitions across the region.

However, one must remain cautious of donor influence and roles in network formation. There is a danger that when donors see networks as the way forward or a more efficient way of disbursing funds they drive the formation of these and do more harm than good. Evidently, there are power dynamics at play when alliances and coalitions are driven or captured by donors – including INGOs; and similarly when they remain in the hands of a few gatekeepers.

Risks Associated With Advocacy

Nevertheless, while various strategies have been used for advocacy from collaboration to litigation, lobbying and negotiation to protest; advocacy by its very nature of harnessing a people's power is a political process subjected to risks. Consider the socio-political context earlier described.

It is important to recognise that a broad spectrum of governance styles exists in Africa; from fully-fledged democracies (South Africa), monarchies (Swaziland), quasi single-party states, benevolent dictatorships (several), virtually no state (Somalia), military rule and full dictatorships. In several of these African states, leadership of advocacy initiatives remains stifled by the state. One should note that advocacy leadership is perhaps the single most decisive factor in the determination of a successful advocacy campaign. Advocacy leadership is about facilitating the growth and leadership of others. The more harrowing and prominent experiences of activists who have been victimised include those of Ken Saro-Wiwa, who was murdered with eight other persons, by the State of Nigeria under Gen. Sani Abacha in 1995 for his environmental advocacy campaign for the people of Ogoni.

Consider the case of the Nobel Peace Prize Laureate 2004, Prof Wangari Maathai who rose to prominence fighting for those most easily marginalised in Africa. Prof. Maathai was arrested several times for campaigning against deforestation in Africa, specifically Kenya. She was once beaten unconscious by heavy-handed police but remained 'a strong voice speaking for the best forces in Africa to promote peace and good living conditions on the continent.'[5] Critics of the Nobel Peace Prize Committee question why this institution did not recognise Prof. Maathai's efforts while she was

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[5] Nobel Peace Prize Committee, October 8th 2004

actively engaged in civil society and particularly during the most trying moments she faced.

While these remain amongst Africa's most visible advocates of human rights, dignity and sustainable development, there are hundreds of others whose struggles take place in small communities, away from the media and without any protection. Left to the whims of the local elite, they are often targeted by local leaders, quasi-militia groups and even a legal and policy framework which subjugates the rights of civil society, for the pro-people positions, which they take. Several cases exist of individuals who have been subjected not only to this kind of risk but whose family members have also been targeted.

One must however recognise that while advocacy leadership is fundamental, different leadership styles exist. That is, leaders with very high profiles versus a more collective leadership. In some parts of the world there has been a deliberate attempt to not associate leadership with one person to avoid the dynamic of personalisation and the seductive aspect of this and to minimise the personal risk. An example of this leadership style in Africa is in the Treatment Action Campaign in South Africa.

While advocacy leadership is crucial, leadership transition is even more so. Collective leadership has advantages in ensuring continuity while at the same time re-energising advocacy initiatives.

Certain aspects of culture and religion are factors, which can also extricate rather than bring people together. However, they can be transcended. Consider the case of Amina Lhawal, the young Nigerian woman who was sentenced to death by stoning by a Sharia Court in Nigeria in 2001. The solidarity across the continent and beyond to obtain a repeal of her sentence is testimony that the risks associated with culture and religion are not insurmountable. However, it should be noted that the 'keepers' of culture and religion can sometimes be even more adversarial than other actors in their efforts to retain a particular power-dynamic in society. Taking on these institutions is often very risky as experienced by many women's organisations across the continent.

However, it is important not to negate culture but recognise that cultural liberty is a vital part of human development; because being able to choose one's identity – who one is- without losing the respect of other's or being excluded from other choices is important in leading a full life (UN, 2004).

Conclusion

In order to understand advocacy in Africa one must first endeavour to understand Africa, only then will you be able to recognise the change that is evident in people's lives, from small communities to the national and international level. The shift in power relations in some instances has taken place in small incremental steps while in other situations it has been tumultuous. Advocacy is thriving in Africa and remains a powerful tool to effect change both within the continent and in positioning Africa globally. However, for as long as the denial of rights remains prevalent both in the region and globally, there will be even greater need to strengthen advocacy efforts and ensure documentation and information sharing of advocacy experiences across the continent, as well as the continued strengthening of advocacy leadership.

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