

An Introduction to Advocacy

What is Advocacy?

In the book *Daughter of the Killing Fields*, Theay Seng tells the horrifying story of her family's flight from Pol Pot's Cambodia¹. Included is the account of her great Aunt and Uncle's unsuccessful attempt to enter Thailand. Having reached the Thai-Cambodia border, Aunt Nan and Uncle An are part of a group of refugees met by Thai soldiers who are determined to force them back. At gunpoint group is herded to the top of a mountain and told to start heading down into Cambodian territory. The valley floor is riddled with landmines. From atop the mountain An and Nan hear the thunder of exploding landmines when refugees sent back before them step on the buried deathtraps. One family refuse to move. The father is shot through the head, and when the rest of the family start to run, they too are mown down by bullets. With the stench of death and fear around them, An and Nan reluctantly accept their fate. They head toward the valley floor, treading over the corpses of those who have gone before, knowing that the mines in those places have already been detonated. Miraculously they make it through alive.

Tens of thousands of Cambodians died in this way. The practise only ended, Theay Sen reports, when the international community became aware of the situation and pressured the Thai Government to stop it. Without this pressure thousands more would have been killed.

This is an example of advocacy at work.

Advocacy is nothing more and nothing less than ***the act of influencing the powerful to act in ways that benefit the poor, the marginalised and the oppressed.***

What Sort of Things Do Advocates Do?

Advocates seek to influence Governments, corporations and consumers to act in ways that benefit the poor, the marginalised and the oppressed.

In a democracy such as Australia advocates generally have four major strategies:

1. ***Appeal to the powerful.*** Advocates can appeal directly to politicians, community leaders, and business leaders to act in ways that bring about justice for the world's poor and oppressed. For example, advocates might visit their local Member of Parliament to raise and follow up on issues or write letters to a corporation that is treating its workers poorly.
2. ***Appeal to the public.*** Advocates may seek to raise public awareness of an issue, with the aim of establishing a critical mass of voters and consumers who care enough about the issue to change their voting and buying habits. This places pressure upon the powerful to act justly. The pressure is twofold. First there is the pressure of moral shame, and secondly there is the pressure of naked self interest as politicians realise they need to change to win votes and corporations realise the

¹ Theay Seng, *Daughter of the Killing Fields* (Fusion 2005)

need to change to keep their customers.

Activities that can be effective in public appeal are things like: education campaigns in churches; protests, marches, and vigils; petitions; letters to newspapers, speaking on talkback radio, press releases; and awareness raising events that attract media attention.

3. ***Appeal to the law.*** The poor, oppressed and marginalised are often unaware of their legal rights. Effective advocacy can often be the result of helping them to discover these, with those who are in a more powerful position calling upon the authorities to enact the legal rights of the oppressed. For example, the International Justice Mission based in the USA prosecutes cases around the world on behalf of those who are powerless.
4. ***Appeal to God.*** Prayer is a key dimension of Christian advocacy. Advocates bring the situation of the poor, oppressed and marginalised before God, pray specifically for them, and cry for justice to be done.

The Tone of Advocacy

People sometimes have images of advocates as militant people parading down streets chanting angry slogans and being hauled away by police. While this is one expression of advocacy it is not the only one, and frequently, not the most effective.

It is also possible to be effective in advocacy using a more peaceful and conversational tone. This second approach is sometimes known as “soft” advocacy. Soft approaches seek to engage the powerful in an ongoing relationship and dialogue. They seek to affirm the good that the powerful are doing, as well as persuading them that more can be done. Public campaigns that take place tend to be less adversarial. They aim to persuade rather than condemn and afford advocates an opportunity to build rather than burn their bridges with the powerful.

Interestingly, both “hard” and a “soft” approaches can be found within the pages of Scripture. For example, the prophet Elijah was forced into a highly confrontational approach with King Ahab and the prophets of Baal. Ahab so despised him that he made Elijah an outlaw, searched high and low to arrest him (1 Kings 18:10) and dubbed him “the troubler of Israel” (1 Kings 18:17). Elijah for his part publicly denounced the king, culminating in the emotion charged and violent confrontation between Elijah and the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18). By contrast the tone of the relationship between the prophet Nathan and King David was much more friendly and respectful. Nathan could speak positively of the king (eg 2 Samuel 7), yet when necessary the relationship provided a context where he could issue a very strong challenge (eg 2 Samuel 12).

Catalyst believes that in the Australian context a soft approach is usually preferable and most effective. Scripture encourages us *“If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone”* (Romans 12:18), urges us to recognise Governments as an authority established by God (Romans 13.1-13) and to pray for those in authority (eg 1 Timothy 2.1-3). These injunctions seem to give a presumption in favour of a soft approach. At the same time Scripture recognises that Governments can behave in

ways that are evil (eg Revelation 13) and should be called to repentance (eg the Old Testament prophets). This demands that we call our Governments to repentance where they are acting in unjust or graceless ways. It may be that there are occasions in which Governments and Corporations have become so evil that a very “hard” approach is justified, but more frequently, a soft approach is able to maintain a balance between affirmation and critique.

Does Advocacy Work?

Advocates can sometimes feel overwhelmed by the size of the issues they confront and wonder whether their hard work can possibly achieve anything. The reality is that, very often, advocacy succeeds in bringing change. Very well known examples abound: the non-violent protest movement led by Mahatma Ghandi that resulted in the independence of India; the abolition of slavery in Britain as a result of the advocacy efforts of William Wilberforce; the US civil rights movement led by Martin-Luther King; the recognition of native title after the court battles of Eddie Mabo.

Successful advocacy stories also abound on a smaller scale. Here are some examples:

Successful Advocacy for Lahu Children in Thailand²

The Chiang Rai Christian Service in Thailand works with impoverished members of the Lahu tribe who move from the hill regions of northern Thailand to the city of Chiang Rai in search of work. They noticed that Lahu children were excluded from local schools. After many patient and gentle visits to local school Principals arguing the case for these children, the schools started admitting the Lahu children.

Successful Advocacy for Garment Workers in Mexico³

Kukdong International is a Korean-owned garment factory in Mexico that manufactures clothes for a range of companies, including Nike and Reebok. In the year 2000 workers started to protest at the terrible conditions they experienced in the factory. These included poverty level wages, rancid worm-infested food (the factory promised free breakfasts and lunch to attract workers), verbal assaults and physical assaults with hammers and screwdrivers. When a strike was called in January 2001 riot police violently assaulted workers.

Hearing of this situation, an American advocacy group launched a campaign focussed on students and administrators at US Universities. Nike and Reebok both produced clothing for many universities that bore the various university logos. The US advocates asked student and administrators to pressure Nike and Reebok to bring change in the Kukdong factory. Against all the odds the students were successful. Both Nike and Reebok intervened to improve the situation in the factories.

² Source of information – personal conversations with staff of Chiang rai Christian service in November 2005.

³ Source of information: Liza Featherstone, *Students Against Sweatshops* (Verso, 2002)

Successful Advocacy for Debt-Burdened Countries⁴

In the mid 1990's a group of people banded together to form the Jubilee 2000 campaign. Many poor nations are saddled with debts that they will never be able to fully repay and their annual payments on these debts frequently dwarf what they receive in aid. Instead of spending money on health, education and economic development poor nations are required to spend it on spiralling debt repayment. The Jubilee coalition was formed to ask Western Governments to forgive the debts. The campaign grew from a small UK office with one staff member and 80 contacts into a movement that had national campaigns in sixty-nine countries and 24 million people signing on to its drop-the-debt petition.

Politicians noticed and massive debt relief was announced for poorer nations. Although much more remains to be done, what has been achieved already has freed up funds for many poorer nations to spend on essential social services. Social spending across all Highly Indebted Poor Countries has risen by 20%; Mozambique has been able to introduce a free immunisation program for children; school fees for primary education have been abolished in Uganda, Malawi, Zambia and Tanzania; and Uganda and Mozambique have been able to sustain economic growth rates of over 5%pa.

In December 2000 Gordon Brown, the British Treasurer (known in the UK as the Chancellor of the Exchequer), declared that when the history books are written they will say that the Jubilee coalition "achieved more standing for the needs of the poor...than all the isolated acts of individual governments could have achieved in a hundred years."

Perhaps it is helpful to close with the comments of one Jubilee2000 campaigner, a member of the Mothers Union: *"I know that I, and thousands of other individuals, have made a difference to the world through our involvement. I can now trust that individuals and their faith and actions count."*

⁴ Source of Information, Graham Gordon, *What If You Got Involved?*(Paternoster, 2003)