Preface

Deborah Eade

'*Communication is the nervous system of internationalism and human solidarity.*' (Juán Carlos Mariategui, Lima, 1923)

The realisation that development and humanitarian relief projects will never, in and of themselves, bring about lasting changes in the structures which create and perpetuate poverty and injustice is nothing new. Back in the 1960s and 1970s, debates raged about whether the satisfaction of 'basic needs' comes first, or whether 'social change' is the only way to address the underlying structures that prevent these needs from being met. The emergence in the early 1990s of advocacy programmes and public-policy departments within mainstream development and relief NGOs reflected the growing sense that the 'needs versus change' dichotomy was a false one, that progress is uneven and incremental, and that sustainable change requires a range of inputs at many different levels, from the household and local community right through to the boardrooms of global institutions.[1] The new orthodoxy was that work to change the policy environment, and to promote specific policies, should thus inform and be informed by efforts to bring about tangible improvements in the daily lives of those who are living in poverty and whose basic rights are abused. This strategy is not one of seeking to achieve spectacular success through NGO advocacy alone, but of taking an integrated approach to the pursuit of social and economic justice for all. Thus, contributions to this volume describe modest but significant achievements, while also revealing something of the painstaking work that underpins them.

But just as there are profoundly conflicting views of what 'development' means, as well as how best to achieve it, so there are many differing approaches to advocacy. In both areas, there may be yawning gaps between what an agency says it believes and does, and the way in which it actually behaves. An obvious example is that of an organisation's declared commitment to promoting gender equity

or cultural diversity, despite the fact that it has a male-dominated leadership and a top–down form of management. When that same organisation takes the moral high ground in public and seeks in its advocacy work to tell others how they should manage their affairs, these gaps can become dangerous credibility deficits.

Research recently undertaken by ActionAid (Chapman and Wameyo 2001) gives some insight into the spectrum of advocacy options, not all of them mutually compatible. What the research does make clear, however, is that although advocacy is self-evidently of a political nature (both in itself, and in terms of what it seeks to achieve), agencies seldom appear much clearer about their politics than they are about which development theory they espouse. Yet no number of campaigns or high-level lobbying activities will add up to a coherent political platform, any more than thousands of projects will constitute a theoretical standpoint on development.

The perceived disjunctures between rhetoric and reality in the field of advocacy work have exposed NGOs to increasing criticism, particularly since the much-publicised anti-globalisation demonstrations in Geneva, Seattle, and Prague. The fact that some critiques are intended to deflect or diminish the impact of NGO advocacy work does not in itself render them invalid. Indeed, NGOs' apparent failure to check that their own houses are in order before launching public attacks on major institutions has sometimes rendered them easy targets — as, for instance, in a piece published in *The Economist*, entitled 'Angry and effective':

> The increasing clout of NGOs, respectable and not so respectable, raises an important question: who elected Oxfam, or, for that matter, the League for a Revolutionary Communist International? Bodies such as these are, to varying degrees, extorting admissions of guilt from law-abiding companies and changes in policy from democratically elected governments. They may claim to be acting in the interests of the people — but then so do the objects of their criticism, governments and the despised international institutions. ... Who holds the activists accountable?[2]

In fairness, and as this volume attests, disquiet about aspects of NGO advocacy was already being voiced by those more sympathetic to the NGO community long before the issue began to hit the headlines (see, for example, Sogge *et al.* 1996, especially Chapter 5, and Michael Edwards' contribution to this volume). It is therefore worth high-

lighting some of the concerns raised most frequently about NGOs that lobby *on behalf of* others.[3]

Some uncomfortable questions

Legitimacy

From where do NGOs draw legitimacy for their advocacy work? Being 'pro-poor' is not enough – especially since, as NGOs themselves argue, 'the poor' are not an undifferentiated mass of identical interests and aspirations. Does their assumed proximity to 'the poor', usually in a donor or aid-related capacity, give NGOs any right to represent them? As three seasoned NGO-watchers put it: '[c]laiming the right to speak out simply because an NGO has projects or contacts on the ground is unlikely to be acceptable to a sceptical audience in the media, among other observers, and – most importantly – a more critical local population' (Edwards, Hulme, and Wallace 1999:15).

Accountability

To whom are NGOs accountable for their choice of advocacy goals and strategies? What voice do their diverse constituencies (donating public, official donors, local interlocutors, or intended beneficiaries, as well as trustees and staff) have in shaping an NGO's advocacy programme? Whose view prevails when there are disagreements among the different stakeholders? Can the intended beneficiaries appoint (or dismiss) their NGO advocate? Or decline to be 'represented' by an NGO on, for instance, the issue of labour standards, on which trade unions have greater legitimacy? If an NGO displaces another representative body, it risks both weakening civil society and also depoliticising the issue, since many companies would prefer their behaviour to be monitored by an international NGO, rather than by a unionised workforce.

Effectiveness

How is the effectiveness of NGO advocacy work evaluated, and by whom? Unless its (long-term) impact can be measured, how can an NGO assess which resources should be dedicated to it? What is to stop an NGO being seduced by the very institutions that it seeks to influence? Where does the 'insider' tactic of constructive engagement stop, and cosy co-existence or outright co-option begin – and who is to decide when that line has been crossed?[4] This issue is now critical, as NGOs switch their attention from the familiar targets of the IMF and the World Bank to focus on specific companies, precisely because the

corporate sector is anxious to show that it is responding to criticism of its social or environmental record by 'respectable' NGOs.[5] A low-cost but high-profile 'greenwash' tactic will protect their reputations but enable the companies to carry on business as usual.

> Many companies, corporate foundations and business associations or partnerships liberally apply the label 'sustainable development' to initiatives or activities that in practice amount to fairly minor interventions to improve environmental management systems or eco-efficiency ... Many ... also focus narrowly on one particular aspect associated with corporate responsibility – for example, environmental protection – and ignore others, such as labour conditions and indigenous rights. (Utting 2000:16)

Content

It is easy for NGOs to criticise and protest against what they don't like, but what concrete alternatives can they propose? And do they have the specialist knowledge as well as the comprehensive vision necessary to do so? Where does the buck stop if an NGO's specific policy recommendations in one context have negative implications for poor people elsewhere, or over time? (As Jennifer Chapman and Thomas Fisher show in their contribution to this volume, the carpet-weaving trade illustrates how an over-simplistic understanding of the full situation can, in the absence of other measures, worsen the situation of child labourers and their families.)

The dangers of self-promotion

Tensions have always existed between an NGO's legitimate fund-raising needs and the means that it uses to meet them, particularly in relation to the mass media. Today, however, aid agencies jostle for television footage or interview sound-bites, since without this constant projection of their 'brand' they fear losing not only their market share but also their influence in the policy arena. Thus, 'the aims of corporate communication have increasingly encroached on the territory reserved for advocacy for development' (Winter 1996: 26). In order to pursue a strategy of 'naming and shaming' the institutions whose policies they hold responsible for causing or exacerbating needless suffering — be it the IMF, a military government, or a sportswear company — an NGO not only needs to be sure of its facts, but must also have an impeccable reputation. Ideally, it also needs to be a respected household name.

We would highlight three dangers that can arise if self-promotion is conflated with what it projects as disinterested altruism. First, if an NGO falls into the trap of devising advocacy campaigns *in order* to raise its profile (as well as keeping the income flowing) – AIDS this year, child soldiers the next – it risks trivialising the issues, as well as instrumentalising its relationships with its Third World 'partners' : selecting and/or manipulating the partner organisations to fit its own agenda. Second, if an NGO feels it must always have something to say on any matter of public concern, it risks not only undermining its own credibility but also crowding out expert (and potentially more persuasive) 'niche' organisations. And third, the projection of simple campaign messages (albeit complemented by expert behind-the-scenes lobbying) that are simultaneously appeals for cash seldom enhances public understanding; yet without a groundswell of well-informed support for change, institutions will remain largely impervious to NGO advocacy efforts. One commentator argues as follows.

> Leaders must be prepared to enter into dialogue with a worried citizenry on how to allocate limited resources. And they must discuss these matters with the public as equals, not as audiences to be manipulated nor as ignoramuses to whom leaders impart a small fraction of their superior knowledge. (Daniel Yankelovich, cited in Winter 1996: 24)

Despite the complexities described in this volume by Dot Keet, the Jubilee 2000 campaign is an innovative and very exciting example of how to develop an advocacy agenda in a way which empowers everyone involved: concentrating first on informing local public opinion on the debt crisis, in order to mobilise people into a global movement which would in turn enable its members to lobby authoritatively at the very highest level.

The question of legitimacy

At this point, it is worth recalling the origins of the word 'advocate'. Derived from the Latin for 'someone called to one's aid', the word generally refers to a legal representative, such as a barrister, who is paid to work on behalf of a client. A secondary meaning applies to someone who argues for a cause or recommended course of action. In the former case, the advocate's legitimacy depends on his or her professional expertise and ability to argue the client's case persuasively. In other words, clients do not speak up unless required to do so. If they are not

satisfied with the performance of their representative, clients may replace their advocates. In the second meaning, the advocate's legitimacy is not *assumed* to be based on expertise, although it may well be. For instance, a local aid worker who is involved in the rehabilitation of war victims might advocate condemning a convicted war criminal to death, in the belief that healing cannot begin until people feel that justice has been done. A colleague might oppose the death penalty in any circumstances and argue that to execute the criminal will serve to perpetuate a culture of violence. Both are entitled to their *opinions*, and both can legitimately press for their views to be heard. By the same token, in weighing up the two opinions, a third party would want to know whether they are genuinely disinterested, or motivated by partisan convictions. In this sense of the term, advocacy is value-based rather than expert-driven.

NGO advocacy rests on both sources of legitimacy, which it tends to conflate. As quintessentially value-driven organisations, NGOs quite rightly invoke their moral mandate to advocate for causes they believe in, even if they do not claim specialist expertise. However, the political nature of advocacy requires NGOs to demonstrate their accountability to their multiple constituencies; and their credibility therefore depends not only on their knowledge of the subject matter but also on genuine dialogue with those whom they seek to represent. This is no easy matter, and it is hardly surprising that few NGOs have the mechanisms in place to be as downwardly accountable as they should be, or the resources to maintain a high level of specialist knowledge over time.

As this anthology from *Development in Practice* shows, critiques of NGO advocacy have come from many quarters, and certain NGOs are making serious efforts to grapple with the issues. More significantly, however, transnational popular movements are now realising the potential of electronic communications to define their own advocacy agendas and strategies. The structural challenge to conventional NGO advocacy will come not from the resident sceptics or armchair critics, but from emerging forms of social organisation and political struggle that do not depend on or want NGO mediation: the traditional arbiters of how advocacy should be done are simply being by-passed in this wave of secular protestantism. If NGO advocacy is to carry authority in the future, it must move decisively away from what might be termed *paternalistic advocacy* (whereby Northern NGOs corner the international forums, and Southern organisations provide the raw material for their lobbying campaigns), to what ActionAid calls *participatory advocacy*,

whereby civil-society organisations are drawn into efforts to broaden the political space within which the voices of the poor can be expressed and heard; and *people-centred advocacy*, whereby people negotiate for their rights on their own behalf. The role of the Northern NGO will then be to act in solidarity – sharing its resources where it can, helping when it is invited to do so, and generating a climate of support for pro-poor policy change within its own immediate constituency.

In her introductory essay to this volume, **Maria Teresa Diokno-Pascual** of the Freedom from Debt Coalition in the Philippines demonstrates the enormous odds against the voices of poor people being heard in the places where decisions that most affect them are made. Development NGOs often used to say that they were working for their own extinction. Whether any institution can actually do this is questionable, but the spirit of this claim was that NGOs believed that the attainment of their goals would render them redundant. It is time to revive this aspiration in relation to advocacy: success would then be measured by the extent to which NGOs (North or South) had opened doors for those who were denied access to the institutions that shaped their lives, helped them to organise their own advocacy agendas -— and then stepped aside.

Notes

1   There is a long history of NGOs whose *raison d'être* was to campaign on behalf of a cause: Anti-Slavery International (formerly the Anti-Slavery Society) is an early example, Amnesty International or Greenpeace are more recent ones. But we refer in this essay to NGOs which have taken on advocacy *in addition* to their traditional role of funding and/or undertaking development and relief activities.

2   *The Economist*, 25 September 2000, in a Business Special from an unnamed reporter based in Washington DC. The writer's arguments against NGOs and political organisations are misleading, however. Their legitimacy is not based on whether or not they are elected, but grounded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which confers freedom of opinion and expression, including the right to receive and impart ideas, freedom of peaceful assembly, freedom of association, and the right to take part in public life.

3   For the purposes of this essay, we exclude those organisations which advocate on behalf of their members, such as consumer unions, labour unions, and various kinds of self-help organisation. These are of course not immune from the problems described here, but they do have formal structures of accountability, and their representational status is relatively clear.

4   Chapman and Wameyo (2001:10) cite criticisms that international NGO advocacy readily becomes 'a debating exercise between members of a "New Managerial Class" in which NGO professionals debate with other members of the same global class in

the international financial institutions. The critique raises the concern that NGO staff based in the industrial capitals, with class origins and academic training similar to those of the World Bank staff, can force policy-making processes open to their own participation, without ensuring access for excluded communities.'

5   Interestingly, the author of *The Economist* article makes the same observation, but from the perspective of embattled organisations being forced by the lunatic fringe to deal with critics whom they perceive to be at the tamer end of the spectrum: 'The activists have also raised the profile of "backlash" issues — notably, labour and environmental conditions in trade, and debt relief for the poorest countries. This has dramatically increased the influence of mainstream NGOs, such as the World Wide Fund for Nature and Oxfam. Such groups have traditionally had some say (albeit less than they would have wished) in policymaking. Assaulted by unruly protesters, firms and governments are suddenly eager to do business with the respectable face of dissent.'

References

Chapman, Jennifer and Amboka Wameyo (2001) *Monitoring and Evaluating Advocacy: A Scoping Study*, London: ActionAid.

Edwards, Michael, David Hulme and Tina Wallace (1999) 'NGOs in a Global Future; Marrying Local Delivery to Worldwide Leverage', Background Paper to a conference of the same title, hosted at the University of Birmingham, UK, 10–13 January 1999.

Sogge, David with Kees Biekart and John Saxby (1996) *Compassion and Calculation: The Business of Private Foreign Aid*, London: Pluto Press.

Utting, Peter (2000) *Business Responsibility for Sustainable Development,* Geneva 2000 Occasional Paper 2, Geneva: UNRISD.

Winter, Anne (1996) *Is Anyone Listening? Communicating Development in Donor Countries*, Geneva: UN NGLS.