

Campaigning: a fashion or the best way to change the global agenda?

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Even bankers want to campaign

A new investment fund was recently launched in London. Climbers abseiled down the building of a financial institution, while unfurling a banner to advertise the new fund. A casual observer could have turned wearily away from what looked like another routine Greenpeace banner-hanging event.

Most NGOs these days want to do more campaigning.¹ Recent studies of the effectiveness of NGO campaigning to date (Chapman and Fisher 1999, 2000) identify the following reasons for this trend: the need of Northern NGOs to find new roles, as Southern NGOs take over project work; the recognition that projects will have limited effects without structural changes; an increasing call by Southern organisations for Northern NGOs to do more campaign and policy work; and the desire among NGOs for public profile. The latter has two distinct aspects: the belief that media coverage is necessary and crucial for policy change,² and the somewhat sounder assumption that it helps fundraising.

Campaign organisations and organisations that also campaign

Campaigning is not a new phenomenon: it has been around for centuries. A characteristic of campaigns is that they spring up when legality and legitimacy find themselves at odds with each other, so that certain groups claim legitimacy for their cause and deny this legitimacy to the prevailing powers. Campaign organisations, whose very reason for existence is to

campaign, have existed for a long time. Anti-slavery International (formerly the Anti-Slavery Society) is one of the oldest such organisations, while Greenpeace and Amnesty International are probably the best-known modern ones.

The success of modern campaign organisations has stimulated organisations which had previously tended to limit themselves to project work to extend or build a campaigning arm. These organisations have quite distinct characteristics. A good campaign organisation is highly interactive, being able both to create an agenda and also to take advantage of existing agendas. It will spend a major proportion of its resources on communication, communication being its core business and not just a tool. Campaigning is a dialectical process, so campaign organisations tend to be confrontational and in turn attract confrontational people. Campaign organisations have to be opportunistic, not in terms of their beliefs and values, but in terms of reaching audiences. They derive their legitimacy from the popular support that they enjoy and from the quality of information that they provide. In a campaign – especially if it is directed at the general public – tactics are as important as strategy, a characteristic which campaigns share with politics.

Organisations that also campaign would obviously want to impose their existing organisational procedures on their campaigning activities. Their campaigning results will, therefore, be less than impressive. Alternatively, they will have to live with two different organisational cultures. Real conflicts of interests between campaigns and project work can arise where no compromise will do justice to both. Campaigns which are undertaken mainly for fundraising purposes may make it possible to avoid such conflicts, but generally at the price of a weak campaign.

Three contemporary campaigns

Three examples will help to identify characteristics of campaigns and to address the difficult question of what campaigns can achieve.

Brent Spar

Few campaigns in recent years achieved such a public resonance as Greenpeace's successful attempt to prevent the dumping at sea of the disused Brent Spar oil platform. Originally it was conceived as a medium-sized action to attract attention to a forthcoming meeting of the Oslo and Paris Convention. (Interestingly, the communication specialists

of the organisation were opposed to the action, predicting that it would have little resonance.) It was not considered a campaign *per se*, only as a tactic within a long-standing lobbying strategy.

It rapidly took on a life of its own. Brent Spar gripped the attention of the European public. Individuals and organisations felt compelled to become active, and were soon followed by a number of governments. Organisations called for a boycott of Shell. Some individuals even firebombed a petrol station. European governments pressured their UK counterpart to reverse its position. Greenpeace occupied centre-stage in the media, but it certainly did not control what happened in the public and political arena. This loss of control – anathema to traditional management approaches – is typical of a successful public campaign. Truly activating people – probably the proudest achievement that a campaign could hope to claim – means that those people will decide largely on their own about the next steps.

The Brent Spar campaign effectively put an end to the dumping of decommissioned oil platforms. The environmental significance of this is low, if one looks simply at the amount of pollution entering the oceans through dumping. However, the symbolic importance is much higher. The oceans can no longer be considered as a convenient and cheap dumping ground far away from where the waste was created.³

After Shell abandoned its plan to dump the platform, Greenpeace experienced a severe setback when it admitted – on its own initiative – that it had overestimated the amount of oil left in the platform. For the central argument, this fact was of secondary importance. It was only brought up towards the end of the campaign, when people were already strongly supporting Greenpeace; and in some countries it was hardly mentioned. However, it tainted Greenpeace's success with the suspicion that the organisation had got its facts wrong: a serious problem for any campaign. Greenpeace's mistake and its ensuing apology were probably reported out of proportion to their real significance, but after the publicity it had received throughout its action, the organisation could hardly complain.

Brent Spar and – equally important – the execution of Ken Sarowiwa were watersheds for Shell and other big oil companies. A large number of senior managers were replaced by a newer generation. The companies conceded that the legality of their action was not enough: they also needed public legitimacy. They committed themselves to listening more to the public. They withdrew from the Global Climate Commission – an industry group which denies the threat of global warming and has

resisted all moves to reduce carbon dioxide emissions. Respect for human rights and a commitment to sustainable development were added to the companies' objectives. Investment in renewable energies multiplied. BP even conceded that the company would eventually have to move out of fossil fuels.

The oil companies reacted incredibly fast, more so than a government or for that matter a major NGO would have been able to do, and so demonstrated the degree to which campaigns can affect corporations. The deeper question of the extent to which these changes are more than a cosmetic make-over to reduce external criticism and restore reputation, however, is hard to answer. Even if the changes are for real, it is too early to judge what effect they will have on the global environment, on human rights, and on poverty. The impact of campaigns is generally extremely difficult and sometimes impossible to judge. One will usually have to wait a long time to tell, and then many other factors will also have had an influence.

Landmines

Landmines appeared on the public agenda less than 15 years ago and the campaign to ban them became one of the most popular causes ever. Eventually, it was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize. The icon of the campaign was Diana, Princess of Wales. Had she been still been alive, she might have been honoured with the Nobel Prize herself. Her importance for the campaign is hard to gauge. Her involvement was as much the effect of the campaign itself as the cause of its success. Rarely do famous people get involved in an early stage of a campaign, with the exception of ageing rock stars who are bored with their own music and worried about their dwindling pulling power.

Once the landmines issue had reached a threshold of public interest, someone like Princess Diana almost naturally appeared on stage – and this is not to deny her seriousness or her importance. The popular media demand the personalisation of issues: they want figureheads and personalities, and they appoint their 'spokespeople', even if campaigning organisations do not nominate them. Popularisation should not be dismissed. On the contrary, it is an important aspect of campaigns, especially in their later stages. Not only does it create pressure: it also gives the cause a democratic legitimacy. Popularisation can be just as difficult as other aspects of campaigning. It requires different skills and also a new type of campaigner.

In the case of landmines, Robin Coupland from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), who provided the first comprehensive field data of mine injuries, and Ray McGrath, founder of the Mines Advisory Group (MAG), who worked in Afghanistan and pioneered mine clearance, probably most deserved to be honoured with the Nobel Prize. But in campaigning as elsewhere, those who sow the seeds rarely reap the harvest.

What was the harvest? Undoubtedly the landmines campaign created a huge awareness of anti-personnel devices and their effects. A sense of solidarity was created, and a call for action was the result. This awareness is not confined to rich countries. A recent study by ICRC (ICRC 1999: 65) in countries that have experienced war revealed a very high awareness of landmines, even in conflicts where they were not used.

The landmines campaign led directly to the Ottawa Treaty, which was negotiated, signed, and ratified unusually quickly. It bypassed the established institutions typically responsible for such a treaty, such as the UN Committee on Disarmament. What was, in the eyes of governments, a security issue best left to military specialists was transformed into a humanitarian issue, with ordinary people displacing the specialists.⁴ NGOs exercised unprecedented influence in the negotiations, finally catching up with their counterparts in international environmental forums. Mine clearance became accepted as a major task and is now a well-funded activity, and the medical treatment of mine victims has also much improved.

On the other hand, key countries such as the USA, Russia, and China have not signed the Ottawa Treaty. The number of landmines used has declined, but if one disregards Afghanistan, Angola, and Cambodia – where landmines were most heavily used, and which were the sites of Cold War-related conflicts – then there is probably not much change in practice. Some cynics have even claimed that the campaign provided the best propaganda for landmines. The campaign also failed to make it clear who carried responsibility: the weapon system was demonised, but its producers and users remained anonymous.

A by-product of the landmines campaign (not uncommon in campaigning) was the ban on blinding laser weapons. It happened almost overnight in 1995, inspired by a combination of three factors: an original report by Human Rights Watch, the concern of the US government about China and other countries developing such weapons, and public concern about inhumane weapons, created by the landmines campaign. Just a few months before the ban was agreed, no one, including the opponents of

landmines, thought that such an outcome was possible. Campaign successes can happen overnight and can also produce completely unanticipated results.

All in all, the landmines campaign had tangible humanitarian benefits, but it failed to take the weapons out of use. Its real success lies in the awareness created and in the resulting shift in international politics. The secrecy of security and military issues was challenged, the process of negotiations 'civilianised', and the burden of proof shifted to the military side. Military need is no longer automatically regarded as more relevant than humanitarian necessity.

So: the campaign was a success, still more so in terms of its potential for the future rather than in terms of real change now. As Chapman and Fisher (1999: 15-16) point out, campaigns have limits. Real and lasting impact, implementation, and monitoring require tools other than national legislation or international conventions: education, involvement of the grassroots, or fundamental changes (addressing the causes of conflict), for example. If they don't happen, the legacy of the landmines campaign may just be another part of the Lady Di folklore.

Debt and Jubilee 2000

The debt issue is more than 20 years old. Its was originally raised by Southern NGOs who observed the effects of spiralling debt on their countries' development. In the West, the argument about debt was highly politicised. The left was in favour of debt relief; the rest of the political spectrum saw the demand for relief as ideologically motivated, communist propaganda under a thin veneer of concern for the poor. The argument was mostly confined to circles of experts and hardly ever reached a broader public.

Somehow – and it is difficult to identify how and when the transformation happened – the debate about debt changed in the 1990s. The minority position that debt relief was essential became the mainstream view. Active politicians and ministers joined their retired colleagues and NGOs in calling for debt relief. A paradigm shift had taken place.

A number of factors caused that shift. A constant stream of reports on the effects of debt kept the issue alive. The quality of field research by NGOs improved (or, as likely, or even more likely, it conformed more to Western standards and adopted the language of economics), so it was harder to reject it out of hand. The end of the Cold War reduced the

ideological content of the debate. Heavily committed banks had had time to reduce their exposure. The World Bank, under the assault of its critics, began to change its policy, while the IMF discredited itself through the patent failure of its own doctrines.

The argument for debt relief had probably already been won when Jubilee 2000 was formed. Jubilee 2000 had the task of further popularising the issue and forming and co-ordinating an international network to create pressure for substantial debt relief. To do so, it needed to demonstrate the widest possible support; so it rightly embarked on widespread coalition-building.⁵

Winning the argument, however, is a double-edged sword in campaigning. The new consensus that develops is typically less radical than the original campaign position. By adopting the new consensus, the mainstream also demands the authority to define it. Once finance ministers are in favour of debt relief, they will also assume the authority for defining the level and form that it should take. Those who campaigned over the years now find themselves easily sidelined, their arguments portrayed as the predictable response of special-interest groups which are never satisfied. Whether Jubilee 2000 managed to avoid this pitfall and achieve full success is probably a contentious matter, even within the campaign. The debt issue serves to illustrate that campaigns are an excellent, possibly even the best, tool to gain symbolic victories, but they cannot by themselves guarantee political and economic change.

Challenges and opportunities for campaigning

The examples selected illustrate some general features of campaigns. Today's political environment poses additional and specific challenges and opportunities.

Challenges

NGOs increasingly work as agents of governments and intergovernmental organisations and they seek co-operation with business. Even with the best possible will, such an approach reduces their independence. Campaigns are by their very nature mostly confrontational, and as such they are constrained if the campaigning organisation is too close to government or business.⁶ Politics and politicians have a bad name the world over, though this reputation is probably unfair. NGOs, by contrast, are still mostly perceived as having integrity and compassion, albeit

mixed with naïvety. As and when their influence increases, they could easily become engulfed in the crisis of the political system.⁷

As more and more NGOs want to campaign, the competition for public interest becomes stronger. For the campaign issues themselves, this competition is mostly beneficial. However, there is also an underlying (and often unacknowledged) competition among the organisations involved, which can weaken a campaign. In most international forums, NGOs appear united. But this unity is obviously a fractious one, given their highly diverse underlying interests. Once the globally operating NGOs fragment – or appear to do so – their collective claim to the moral high ground is damaged.

For most established NGOs, it is more cost-efficient to concentrate on ‘upgrading’ their members (that is, increasing the contribution per member) than on maximising the numbers of supporters. More members, however, give campaigns greater legitimacy. So an unfortunate choice has to be made between the two: the most cost-efficient fundraising method, on the one hand, and greater legitimacy on the other.

For a long time, campaigns were mostly for ‘progressive’ causes (which today may be more difficult to define). However, the instrument of campaigning is not necessarily restricted to progressive causes. Right-wing groups campaign against immigration, while inter-governmental organisations increasingly incorporate campaigns into their own agendas. Chris Rose⁸ suggests that in the future campaigning might even become a commercial activity. Indeed, one could imagine a major coffee importer offering fair-trade coffee and at the same time campaigning for girls’ education.

Opportunities

The much-cited New Media (not to be equated with the Web) offer the possibility of a close and interactive relationship with members and supporters, and consequently the chance to mobilise and activate people very quickly. The cost of communicating with members is also much lower, which removes the need to have to choose between efficient fundraising and broad-based support.

Organised consumers can exert substantial pressure on companies and can produce quick results in a campaign. New technologies enable consumers to organise efficiently and effectively.

NGOs are used to forming coalitions based on shared objectives and values. Coalitions increase legitimacy, but they are slow and tend to

create positions that reflect the need for internal compromise rather than relevance to the external world. The Jubilee and landmines campaigns could not, of course, match the speed of movement of the tightly coordinated Greenpeace organisation in the Brent Spar campaign. But then Greenpeace would not have succeeded without the wave of spontaneous and independent support from many quarters. It is certainly rare that such mobilisation happens, so there is a need deliberately to build wider constituencies in most campaigns.

It may be useful for NGOs to think more about strategic alliances based on shared interests. Shared interests have the advantage that they are more likely to lead to action. They reduce the need for co-ordination and allow for independent activities. They can help to push an issue to the centre of the stage (and increase the 'market' and thereby the profile of all involved). Strategic alliances are pragmatic, are intended to last for limited periods, and should ideally involve members from various areas (development, environment, and human rights).

For Southern NGOs, New Media offer the opportunity to find members and raise funds globally, reducing potential financial dependency, and so dramatically increasing their independence. Pilot tests show that this can be very successful, particularly if the Southern NGO is part of a global organisation.

Can campaigns change the global agenda?

One of the most important objectives for development organisations is to achieve a fair global economic system.⁹ Campaigns alone cannot achieve this objective, but they can make an important contribution. They can raise awareness and create symbols of the problem. They can activate millions of people and bring together organisations from around the world. They can raise and win the arguments about defining what is fair and what is patently unjust. They can develop a new narrative for development. As Maggie Black once remarked, NGOs are not good at making waves – indeed, they may even waste energy in trying to create waves – but they are good at riding them.¹⁰ This is less a criticism of NGO campaigns than it is an acknowledgement of the limited political and economic might of NGOs.

We will see many organisations campaign for a new global economic system. The most dynamic and most original of these campaigns will originate from small, radical, young groups. They will spring up where the problem is most urgent and visible. After all, riding waves is for young

people. In the end, however, bigger organisations – and societies as a whole – will have to learn to make waves.

Notes

1 This article does not make a distinction between campaigning and advocacy, and for simplicity it consistently uses the term *campaigning*. Only campaigning by NGOs, mostly large organisations in the North, is studied. Commercial campaigns are left out, for obvious reasons, but also political election campaigning, as it is substantially different from the campaigning considered here. Key differences are the much shorter timespan, the clear demarcation of winners and losers, and the fixed stages in an election campaign.

2 'Public profile' is often used as a euphemism for media coverage. The importance of media coverage in campaigns is probably over-estimated. While important in later stages of a campaign, it is in all likelihood not essential before the popularising phase.

3 This was not just a symbolic result. Under the direct influence of Brent Spar, in line with long-standing campaigns on behalf of the oceans by Greenpeace and others, and following a trend among most European governments, European countries agreed strong restrictions on waste disposal at sea, coming close to a complete prohibition.

4 This was well expressed by Princess Diana's response to being criticised for meddling in political questions: 'I'm not a political figure, nor do I want to be one. But I come with my heart.'

5 Typically, coalitions in earlier stages of a campaign are less useful, sometimes even detrimental, because they reduce mobility and blunt the sharpness of the argument.

6 One should remember that neither governments nor business are monolithic. It is not impossible, therefore, to combine confrontation and co-operation.

7 NGOs would be ill-advised simply to join the blanket condemnation of politicians and politics. Politicians are probably less corrupt than business people, but are also under higher scrutiny. A weak political system will make it harder, not easier, for most campaigns to achieve real change.

8 Personal communication. Chris Rose is a campaign adviser to Greenpeace International.

9 Barry Coates, director of the World Development Movement, speaks of a 30-year campaign to regulate the global economy.

10 Maggie Black (1992) made this remark to the Oxfam Assembly.

References

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