

CONSTITUENCY BUILDING

Advocacy is not just used to persuade policy-makers to address a problem (policy outcome) – an additional aim of your policy work can be to enhance the awareness and Participation of citizens in policy-making. Advocacy relies on a variety of leaders, activists and organizations with different skills and talents, as well as committed citizens willing to organize themselves to change their lives. Constituency-building refers to activities aimed at strengthening the involvement of those most affected by an issue in the design and leadership of advocacy to build their knowledge, capacity and agency so that they can effectively participate in public forums.

Why is constituency building critical for advocacy?

Building people's participation lends the power of informed numbers to a cause. In many cases NGOs engage in advocacy on behalf of communities and do not include them in these efforts, sometimes only mobilizing them for use in a protest. Without the initial buy-in and inclusion of communities that you are working with, the legitimacy of your advocacy can be called into question. Constituency building means to build your advocacy on the voices of people, responding to their concerns, and contributing to enhancing awareness of a group of citizens at the same time.

With the inclusion of communities in your advocacy initiatives the success of your advocacy will have longer termed success as communities will ensure that the success is implemented and realized. A citizen-centered or constituency approach transforms the role of 'beneficiary' from a passive recipient to an active agent of change.

Why have constituencies?

1. Legitimacy

The larger numbers of the constituency signal that all these people have a stake in the outcome.

Issues: Who speaks for whom and how differences of opinion are resolved where individual participants vary in strength and resources.

2. The power of numbers, dealing with others

A constituency will give more credibility when others, not members of the NGO, are part of the advocacy.

3. Accountability

A constituency means the NGO is reporting to a grassroots base and has to explain its actions/activities.

Issues: Who enjoys the benefits and suffers the costs of what the alliance achieves, especially at the grassroots.

4. Structures

NGO structures may need to be modified to allow for input and reporting to constituencies.

Issues: how to deal with the challenges of genuinely international governance, decision making and communication.

5. Strategies

The NGO will need to consider the constituency base and may need to adapt its procedures.

Issues: The need to develop more vigorous arguments and more credible alternatives as a

contribution to policy debates.

6 Build an organizations' capacity

The use of more people with more expertise and more authority to undertake advocacy.

In contrast, a citizen-centered or constituency approach transforms the role of 'beneficiary' from a passive recipient to an active agent of change.² NGOs with informed and articulate constituencies become a vehicle for expression of citizen interests and have the capacity to hold the government accountable. Arguably, informed and engaged NGOs represent a purer form of citizen involvement even than political parties.³

Benefits of a constituency

The constituency can be effective in two contexts. One as part of the NGO organization and secondly as part of any advocacy campaign.

The concept of constituency as it relates to NGOs can be complex and can embrace a range of different themes. At the bottom, an NGOs constituency is that body of persons and institutions whose concerns are addressed by its work, the **beneficiaries**, the **members**, and the **community**. An NGO that is well anchored in its constituency has both short and long-term goals and is one whose work reflects these interests and seeks to advance them. It is the constituency that lends legitimacy and weight to efforts to influence political and economic decision making.⁴

In the NGO or organizational context – the constituent will include –

- The group of voters – Board members, ordinary members of the NGO
- A group of supporters or patrons of the NGO

- The group served by the organization – the clients and/or the beneficiaries.

In the advocacy context – the concept of constituent includes -

- People who have a direct stake in an advocacy solution because they are directly affected by the problem, and who will benefit from the strategy (primary constituents);
- People who care deeply about the problems although they may not experience it personally, and are willing to make their voices heard (secondary constituents).

In the advocacy campaign context you need to distinguish between constituents, members and beneficiaries.

- Members of an organization may belong to the organization but are not necessarily affected by the issues, or want to be part of a campaign.
- Beneficiaries of a service provided by a NGO may not be your constituents either. They may be affected by the issues but choose not to be part of any campaign.
- But beneficiaries and members can be constituents
- But your constituents are not always all your members and beneficiaries, both long-term and short-term advocacy efforts work better with strong links with constituency groups. Effective advocacy requires:

- Alliances between organizations and with key individuals for leverage,
- Legitimacy, and
- Implementation.

Organizational gain depends on:

- Effective decision making,
- shared leadership,
- Clear roles,

- Communication and
- Members and staff with analytical skills and confidence.⁵

In the NGO organizational context the challenge is to mobilize beneficiaries of services into becoming constituents. The challenge for the human rights organizations is to ensure a balance between primary and secondary constituents.

In advocacy, your constituency will probably be:

Members of your community who are concerned about or affected by the issue that you are addressing and choose to support your work or your campaign.

You may have primary constituencies or secondary constituencies

Your primary constituents are:

People who have a direct stake in an advocacy solution because they are directly affected by the problem and will benefit from the strategy

Your secondary constituents are:

People who care deeply about the problem although they may not feel it personally and are willing to make their voices heard

Your constituency may be the beneficiaries, the community, it may be a series of NGOs who sympathize with your cause/issue, it may be people in the government, lawyers etc. It may also be a foreign audience.

For example, in the case of Amnesty International, they have their volunteers who disseminate

the information.

Note: In the case of Human Rights Watch, they use the press as a surrogate constituency – their press releases are made readily accessible to women’s organizations, environmental groups, religious organizations etc. who are prepared to act.

So we need to distinguish between beneficiaries, members, and constituents.

Beneficiaries of a service provided by an NGO whether it be a development or human rights organizations, may not necessarily be your constituents either.

Why?

Members of an organization are not necessarily affected by the issue you are campaigning for, or may not wish to partake of the campaign. Although they may be affected by the issue that you are addressing, they may choose not to active in any of your campaigns.

Any move to embrace advocacy needs has to go hand in hand with alliances to ensure that the changes at the macro level are transformed into gains for the people on the ground. Changes in ways of operations now require NGOs to link in different ways and forge links with other groups in civil society. These links can reach further and deeper into mainstream of politics and economics e.g. trade unions, consumer groups, women’s and environmental movements, universities, and think tanks. This can cause a local and global movement that is sustainable.

Challenges

The challenge for development organizations may be to mobilize beneficiaries of services into becoming constituents, The challenge for human rights organizations may be to ensure a balance between primary and secondary constituents.

The reasons for the lack of support for a campaign on the part of members may be many. There may be a conflict of interest or prior commitments elsewhere. However, this is not to say that beneficiaries and members cannot be constituents. Only that your constituents are not necessarily all your beneficiaries and all the members of your organizations.

Identifying who is your constituency

To identify who is your constituency, you need to determine:

- 1 who are the individuals/groups who are likely to benefit from the outcome/success of your campaign?
- 2 what do they know about the issue you are addressing and how do they feel about it?
- 3 What other circumstances could impact their decisions?
- 4 What do they know about you and how do they feel about you?
- 5 What do you specifically want from them: increased knowledge, legislation or commitment to change behavior?

Note: your constituency does not necessarily have to be the group on whose behalf you are campaigning-

- if your campaign is about children's rights, your constituency could well be: parents, teachers, pediatricians, clergy, and many more who have a stake in the survival and wellbeing of children.
- an organization working on refugee rights may have the refugees as direct constituents, and intellectuals, NGOs, policy-makers and donors, international human rights organizations as secondary constituents.

The focus of advocacy campaigns has often been on secondary constituents, but primary constituents are very important.

Allies	Opponents
Who will gain – what will be gained?	Are there any organizations/individuals opposed to your objective? Why?
Who will benefit from your efforts?	

Who supports the issue/objectives already?	Which groups will lose if your objective is achieved?
Will someone benefit financially if he objective is achieved? Who?	Will anyone lose financially if your objective is met? Who?
What agencies, ministries or departments in the government will gain if the	Which government agencies, ministers or departments will lose if the objective is
Objective is reached?	Reached?
Could any religious groups support your objective?	Why might religious groups oppose the objective?
Would any government officials gain politically or financially from your objective?	
Do any officials philosophically support the issue or objective?	Do any officials philosophically oppose the issues/objective?
Who could be your ally from the private/business sectors? NGO Sector/Entertainment Sector?	Who might be your opposition from the private/business Sector? NGO Sector or Entertainment Sector?

Capacities

With a larger or defined constituency base, NGOs may need a new range of skills and competencies in learning, bridging, mediation dialogue and influencing.

A broader base of capacities including the ability to listen to, learn from, and work with, others at both the local and global levels, within and outside the development/human rights sectors, more strategic understanding of how and where global issues —bitel on the NGO agenda and how organizations need to change in order to respond to new demands.

- Ways of working less focused on promoting their own profile and more on building alliances, working with others and dividing up the roles and responsibilities in a collaborative way.
- Openness to new ideas and greater willingness to learn in the context of new actors and problems.
- Look to the underlying issues – identify and make sure these are understood by the constituency within a human rights framework.
- Be fast moving and face unpredictable change
- entry of corporations, religious organizations and trade unions into the human rights/development debate.
- Increasing sophistication of information technology.
- Face scrutiny on legitimacy and accountability issues
- Few NGOs have democratic systems of governance or accountability.
- Need to be more open and transparent.
- New ways of gathering and sharing information, the advocacy efforts may not lie with your NGO.
- Use of members of the community in gathering information related to the indicators e.g. numbers of children not at school and why? Numbers of people in prison and why?
- Action planning – what can we do about the issues
- Avoid the temptation to act in the short term and when the issue/crisis is passed, revert

to non-active

• Constituency memberships need –

- Clarity and agreement about the problem
- knowledge of how political and legal systems work and can be used to address the problem
- Confidence and skills to enter the public sphere.
- Frame the message – address related problems that lead to the root causes
- Look at the barriers to constituency building.