

The strengths and roles of the local church in advocacy

1. Local influence

Local churches have the ability to exert real power and influence on local issues and local power-brokers. As part of the community, the local church sees and experiences local injustice first-hand, and as a collective group, can be in a position to take action.

The local church leader can exert influence because in many communities they will be respected as someone who exercises moral authority. Even in contexts where the church is in a minority such as Niger, a church leader will be recognised as a religious leader, and therefore someone to be respected and listened to. They will thus often carry more weight and influence at a local level than an NGO, especially as many NGOs come from outside the community.

Examples

A pastor of a church in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, is active in advocacy on behalf of children who are being abused. In one example, the uncle of a young girl was abusing her, and she had become HIV+ and sick. The pastor took the uncle to the police, and despite endemic corruption, managed to make sure the police pressed charges. The uncle ran away and has not been in contact with the girl since. The pastor now acts as an advocate for a number of children. This pattern is being repeated by a number of pastors in the city.

Local churches in Zambia were encouraged to challenge the provision of services at local government level. In one example, roads had not been constructed despite government promises, and so a number of church pastors lobbied their MP until the situation was rectified.

As part of their church mobilisation work, a Christian NGO in Zimbabwe normally encourages local churches to identify and utilise their own resources and the resources of their community. However, due to the current crisis, churches are very poor, and so the NGO now trains and encourages churches to lobby local schemes (whether run by the government, World Food Programme or others) for the distribution of food and educational support for those they are working with.

In Sierra Leone, a Christian agency (EFSL) have brought together church leaders together across the denominations to form District Advocacy Committees (DACs). So far, 120 local churches have formed three main committees (based in 3 separate geographical areas). These committees identify advocacy issues and meet with the local authorities. Significant impact has been achieved.

2. Ability to mobilise others

The local church is the best institution to empower citizens at a grass-roots level in many countries. It is influential, sustainable, indigenous and carries weight.

In Zimbabwe, the church is the only institution allowed to come together by law. In countries with significant Christian populations, it is difficult for the government to restrict the activities of the church, and particularly to stop it meeting, because in many cases, even the government ministers and judges are Christian. This gives the churches opportunities that are not open to other civil society groups.

Example

Seventy churches in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, from across the denominational spectrum came together for the first time in 2005 following the government's slum clearance programme. The churches opened up their buildings so that evicted people could stay rather than being forcibly removed to remote rural areas, until appropriate infrastructure had been provided. It was the first time that the local churches had come together as one to speak and act with a unified voice. There was a strong sense of spiritual unity too, as for the first time church pastors from Catholics through to Pentecostals prayed together. Every Monday these pastors came together for prayer and support. This unity provided great strength. Whenever one pastor was arrested all the churches rallied round and provided support. Most of these churches were previously apolitical, but they have come to realise that unless things change politically, all other caring programmes will fail.

The strategic role of the church in advocacy

In other contexts, it may be appropriate for the local church to collaborate with the advocacy of other civil society groups, lending their voice and support to work already being done.

3. Local information gathering

The local church is ideally placed to gather first-hand accounts and information of what is happening at local level and pass these on to church structures that can use them to inform and strengthen their advocacy work. Clearly, this only works where there are good links between the local churches and their church structures/ co-ordinating networks. Where local churches are isolated from, or unconnected to, the wider bodies of the church, it is very difficult for them to play this role.

The church can speak on what they know and experience first hand, not on what they read about through second-hand sources, which makes it less easy for authorities to contradict them.

Example

During the Sudan government's bombing campaign of the South, the New Sudan Council of Churches built the capacity of the bishops and senior church leaders to establish basic communication networks and procedures to ensure that information about the Sudanese government bombing campaigns got reported. Despite the absence of telephones, local priests and parishioners (having been encouraged by the bishops) would find ways of getting information through to regional offices about local bombing (sometimes by word-of-mouth; sometimes by using the NGO radios in the district). The information gathered was regarded as better and more reliable than that of anyone else's, including the CIA! This information provided the basis for concerted lobbying of the UN and other groups, and helped to influence UN resolutions on Sudan, and increase pressure on the Sudan government.

In a similar way, the churches reported on human rights abuses and people displacement occurring as a result of oil exploitation. Often only the church had access to these areas, and no NGOs could get there, so the information they provided was invaluable.

4. Sharing information at community level

Local churches are well placed to share information with church members and community members, information that can then be used to address injustices and hold politicians and power-holders to account. Local churches provide a natural forum within which such information can be shared, as people gather together on a regular basis to share news and also to hear teaching.

For example, local churches can help people know how they can contact their MP, or inform people about how they can join the local hospital's stakeholder group, or form one if one doesn't exist. They can educate and empower citizens as to their rights, and how they can exercise their democratic rights where these exist.

Example

One national church network in Kenya has mobilised churches to publish on notice-boards how much money the government has given to the school and to hold teachers to account for the use of this money.

5. Acting as a mediator and peace-broker

Local churches can act as an important force for reconciliation in a community. The church brings a strong values base and theology that is sympathetic to reconciliation. Admittedly, this isn't always acted upon and churches have been guilty of serious abuses, but generally, there is an underlying ethos towards peace.

Examples

Whilst the facilitators of the reconciliation process in communities in Southern Sudan were outsiders from the New Sudan Council of Churches (sometimes ex-patriates/ sometimes bishops), the local churches owned the process, gave it their support and were often involved in the logistics of the event. By doing so, they gave the process legitimacy and helped it not to be seen as an outside, alien initiative. The presence of external facilitators was however essential – the issues were too sensitive and risky to be handled by those within the communities themselves.

In food delivery during relief times, the local church occasionally acts as a mediator between the relief provider (often the church denomination) and the community, ensuring there is fair distribution of food and challenging any corruption.

6. Prayer

The value of prayer in helping to shape and influence the hearts and minds of those in power, but also those praying, cannot be under-estimated, and clearly this is a central role that can be played by the local church.

For example, national weeks of prayer for children's issues is a major way churches are currently engaged in advocacy in Bolivia and Colombia through Red Viva.

7. Experience

Many local churches are already doing advocacy, even if they do not use that term. For many, standing up for the oppressed and for the vulnerable is a natural thing to do.

Author: Tulo Raistrick, Tearfund