

## The strengths and potential roles of church structures in advocacy

### 1. Credibility with many national governments

Although not universal, church structures do carry a degree of credibility with many national governments in quite widely differing contexts, which gives them access to key decision-makers. For example, in Egypt, whilst the church could not risk taking an adversarial approach to advocacy, it does have a strong reputation in social action and therefore a degree of credibility with government and other religious leaders. In Haiti, the church has direct access to many government ministers. And in Sierra Leone, when senior church leaders ask for an audience with the government, even with the President, it is normally granted.

Church structures tend to have credibility when it comes to making the moral case for action. Senior church leaders are good at making the moral case to politicians rather than the technical case to technocrats, a task that can and should be left up to the specialist NGOs.

### 2. Ability to influence and mobilise hundreds of thousands of people

Senior church leaders can carry huge amounts of influence. If they speak out on issues, local church leaders are given the confidence and theological legitimacy to do the same, and thus key groups in every community can become envisioned and mobilised for action. No NGO can match the influence of senior church leaders in this regard.

In Malawi, for example, the Catholic Bishops wrote a pastoral letter on the political state of the nation that was read out in all congregations on the same day. This made a huge impact, whilst giving protection to individual churches, and it was an action that couldn't be stopped by the government.

### 3. Links to wider networks

Just as church structures can influence downwards to local church level, so they can influence outwards to the wider world through their networks and their international denominational bodies. These links can be immensely valuable in bringing to bear strategic national and international pressure on the powerful.

### 4. Access to the media

National churches have access to the media. When they speak out, they get reported. Senior church leaders are much more likely to be given coverage by the national and international media (eg, an article or letter published, a speech covered) than an NGO.

### 5. A conduit for information

Church structures can play a key role in encouraging local churches to gather and send up information that it can collate and then send on to relevant external agencies. The action of church structures, for example, in co-ordinating the flow of information from the ground to international bodies on the impact of the Sudanese bombing campaign was pivotal in achieving the international pressure that led to the cease-fire in Sudan.

### 6. Ability to act as international advocates

Senior church leaders can carry significant moral weight and influence when provided with the right platform.

Thus, Bishop Paul Msusu and Archbishop Donald Mtetemela proved strong and effective advocates at the G8 Conference at Gleneagles. As southern church leaders, their views were well heard.

Sudanese Church leaders were key in speaking out at oil company shareholder meetings around the world. The impact of this was significant, forcing many of the companies to withdraw from Sudan (even if they did sell their work on to Asian companies for a high profit).

## 7. Representing the views of the church

Senior church leaders can speak with an incredibly powerful voice if given the confidence and the information to do so. For example, the head of the UCE denomination in Bolivia represents 1500 churches; the head of the Kale Heywet Church of Ethiopia represents six million Christians. It is difficult for governments to ignore the views of such large bodies.

## 8. Appropriate collaboration with governments in minority contexts

Where the church is a persecuted minority, most forms of advocacy are very difficult. However, it should be supported to engage in collaborative, non-confrontational approaches to advocacy on issues that the government is committed to. For example, access to ARVs may be a stated government objective that church structures can encourage and support by encouraging the government bureaucracies at regional and district level to implement.

## 9. Collaboration in wider alliances

It is essential for churches to speak with one voice if governments are to listen. This means alliances and collaborative advocacy efforts within the evangelical constituency (Micah Challenge being an excellent example of this), but it also means evangelical church structures embracing broader church constituencies as well.

In most contexts, for church advocacy to be listened to at a national level, it must be wider than just the evangelical structures. There are exceptions where the evangelical presence is so large that governments are forced to take note of a purely evangelical coalition, but generally it needs to be a much broader coalition to be effective. Indeed, evangelicals have much to learn from more ecumenical and mainline church structures, who have tended to have a much stronger emphasis on justice and participation. The influence of the World Council of Churches with this mandate is very significant on national Council of Churches bodies. By isolating itself, the evangelical church significantly weakens its own voice.

A good example of collaboration is in Malawi and Zambia, where despite the huge size of the evangelical church, on issues of national interest, the Evangelical Alliance will work closely with the Christian Council of Churches and the Catholic Episcopal Council. This is crucial and gives the church an influence that is very difficult for any government to ignore.

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