

Challenges for church structures in engaging in advocacy

1. Capacity

Church structures have significant capacity restrictions for advocacy (people; time; resources to produce materials, engage with the media and with networks). Some of them would find it difficult to manage advocacy posts even if they had the resources due to a lack of skills and understanding. And obtaining funding is difficult as it is difficult to show short-term impact.

In Nigeria, for example, denominations may speak out at synods on issues of corruption or governance and issue communiqués or letters to the press, but there is very little follow-up or capacity to do so, and so little influence. The government can easily ignore the one-off salvos fired by the church.

There is a need to invest significantly in building the capacity of church leaders if they are to speak out.

2. Differing priorities for advocacy

Many church structures are involved in advocacy, but the issues they choose to advocate on may not be specifically poverty related. Many senior church leaders are prepared to speak out on issues of religious freedom or the threat they perceive posed by Islam, but they are less inclined to speak on poverty related issues. This is in part due to priorities and interests, but may be in part due to another factor, a lack of knowledge in specialist issues.

3. A fear of persecution

This is also the case for local churches involved in advocacy. The greater profile of senior church leaders protects them from some political interference, but in contexts where regimes are more oppressive and prepared to incur a degree of public opprobrium, senior church leaders can become more vulnerable, as the government will move quickly to silence their influential voice.

4. A lack of expertise and knowledge in specialist areas

Church structures often have a limited or out-dated understanding of key poverty related issues, and this can undermine both confidence to speak out and credibility when they do. For example, the Catholic Church stance on condoms tends to discredit much of what it can say on the issue of HIV.

5. A lack of integrity

As with local church leaders, but to an even greater extent, senior church leaders can be the target of concerted attempts to co-opt them to a political agenda that compromises their ability to speak out for justice.

In many countries, church structures can be compromised by their willingness to receive funds from the government. In Zimbabwe, some of the main Christian networks have been infiltrated by the government, and have consequently produced pro-government statements. Their advocacy has been significantly compromised, and it is this which has brought into being alternative networks to try and truly represent the views of the church.

6. A lack of unity

Evangelical church structures often struggle to share a shared agenda and platform with mainstream church groups, thus weakening the effectiveness of their advocacy on key issues. Furthermore, they often struggle to even reach agreement amongst themselves.

Author: Tulo Raistrick, Tearfund

Tearfund is a Christian relief and development agency building a global network of local churches to help eradicate poverty