

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ADVOCACY, POWER AND POLITICS¹

Power

Have you ever been in a meeting and said something that almost nobody noticed, yet a few minutes later, someone else said exactly the same thing and everyone in the group paid attention, perhaps even praised the “brilliant” idea she/he had? In thinking about this, you may have thought that the person who repeated your idea had a great deal of leverage (or power) in the group.



Figure 1: Alienation of Less Educated People in the Decision Making Processes.
Technical Idea: Iman Mandour & Nader Tadros; Artistic Idea: Golo.

Conversely, you could be in a group where the ideas that you have are taken seriously, and you have some leverage. Your power is *relative*. Many women (VeneKlasen & Miller 2002), especially in traditional societies, for instance, share great ideas when there is an all-women

¹ Nader Tadros, 2010. Excerpts from: Advocacy: People's Power and Participation. PEOPLE'S ADVOCACY, Virginia, USA. All Rights Reserved 2010 ©.

meeting. When the same women are in another gathering where men are present, they shy away from sharing their ideas for fear of not been taken seriously. In another example, villagers may generate great ideas among themselves, but when they meet with “well-educated” people, they may tend to undermine their innovation and deep life experience. There are numerous examples of this perception of one’s own power. Again, power is *relative*.

Taking the dimension of power into account is crucial to our advocacy work. Many groups, especially those who are disadvantaged, fragmented, or marginalized, may feel that they are totally powerless. When you ask why they have not taken any actions to address an injustice in their community, they may answer by saying, that a company is too powerful, or has too many connections, or too many people in the area work for them, etc. In other words, they see themselves as powerless and the other party as powerful.

As advocacy practitioners, we need to address the issue of their perception of their own power versus the other people’s power. We need to help them analyze their power from different angles and help them identify their own sources of power (Cohen, et al; 2001). The following tools help us analyze the dimensions of power.

Power Types

Power is expressed in a different ways (VeneKlasen & Miller, 2002²)

Power Over is likely the most common way of power expression that comes to mind when the word “power” is mentioned. Power over is when someone has the power to enforce or coerce. A vivid example of this is dictatorships around the world. Although this form of power has a mostly negative connotation, it can also be positive based on intent. A parent, for example, has the power to discipline their child if the child does not behave well. A judge has the power to pass sentencing on a criminal.

² VeneKlasen, Lisa; and Miller, Valerie, 2002. A New Weave of People, Power and Politics: The Action Guide for Advocacy and Citizen Participation, P. 45 World Neighbors, Oklahoma, USA.

IDEA: IMAN MANDOURI AND NADER TADROS DRAWING: GOLO



Figure 2: Power Holders May Use Different “Power-over” ways to Keep Others Powerless.
Technical Idea: Iman Mandour & Nader Tadros; Artistic Idea: Golo.

It is the negative utilization of this expression of power that advocacy and social justice practitioners, need to change. The way to change the negative aspect of *Power Over* is to help people find alternative positive expressions of power. Following are alternative expressions of power that people can use to counterbalance the negative prevailing *power over* expression.

The picture on the right, which is taken from an unknown source, shows, possibly, another form of power over that women endure in many parts of the world. Unfortunately, gender balance often manifests such skewed power relationships.



Figure 3: Possibly, This Picture Shows A Form of “Power over” Often Seen in Gender Relations.
Source of the picture is unknown.

Alternative Sources of Power

To counterbalance the destructive *power over*, we need to help people recognize other forms of power they already have.

Power To is the abilities, skills and talents that individuals and groups have that help them achieve success. This *power to* may be traditional crafts, special skills learned in school, specialized education, or merely the unique life experiences of individuals and groups. It is important for advocacy practitioners to help surface this unique potential to help shape a more just world.



Figure 4: In Working with Traditionally Disempowered Groups, We Should Emphasize Their Sources of Power. Technical Idea: Nader Tadros & Iman Mandour; Artistic Idea: Golo.

Power With is about the collective voice. “*Power with*”, VeneKlasen & Miller (2002) *multiplies individual talents and knowledge.*” Many disadvantaged communities and groups are fragmented and are often challenged by working together. *Power with* helps the group to see common issues, and get organized to take action.



Figure 5: Power of Numbers! Technical Idea: Iman Mandour & Nader Tadros; Artistic Idea: Golo!

Power Within is believing in one's own worth and abilities. It is overcoming the sense of powerlessness, and shifting it into a confident, yet realistic, frame of reference. This expression of power recognizes that a good part of one's powerlessness is actually the perception of being powerless. Helping disadvantaged individuals and groups realize their worth and power, while respecting and appreciating the worth of others, is likely the biggest step toward addressing the state of powerlessness and turning it to powerfulness.

Power within is one of the most difficult changes to achieve especially with groups that have traditionally been disadvantaged and marginalized groups such as indigenous groups, women, illiterate rural communities, youth, and very poor communities. Over a long time of oppression and structural marginalization, many of these groups adopt the belief that they are truly inferior to others. Battered women, for instance, often believe that they deserve it for being disobedient to their husbands, or male members of their families. Illiterate people would defer the decision to the *better educated* people even if they come from outside of their communities.

Politics

How many times have you heard in your work, “This is not about politics”, or “We don’t get involved in politics”. To be able to examine these statements, we first need to define the word *politics*.

Exercise

Go back to your group with whom you work and answer the following questions.

- *Where do we see politics happening? List the arenas, (i.e., parliament, congressional committees, coalitions)*

- *Now, reflect on your organization. Does politics happen in your organization? How is it manifested?*

- *Think of your neighborhood, your apartment building, homeowners association, or even at home. Can you also see politics happening?*

Most people have a negative impression about politics. Probably the most phrase that people associate with politics is “*politics is a dirty game!*”



Figure 7: A Common Perception about Politicians.

Technical Idea: Iman Mandour & Nader Tadros; Artistic Idea: Gulo

Politics is simply what goes in the process of collective decision-making, be it for a family, or for a whole country. The realization of how fundamental politics is to our everyday life, is critical to our advocacy and social justice work. Collective decisions, which are made through a political process, greatly affect our daily lives. In doing advocacy, we need to know the political process and how to be part of it. Our work is, in a sense, political, whether we like it or not (Cohen, et al, 2001⁴, and VeneKlasen & Miller 2002⁵).

⁴ Cohen, David in: Cohen, David; de la Vega, Rosa, and Watson, 2001. Advocacy for Social Justice: A Global Action and Reflection Guide, P. 19. Kumarian Press, Inc., Connecticut, USA.

⁵ VeneKlasen, Lisa; and Miller, Valerie, 2002. A New Weave of People, Power and Politics: The Action Guide for Advocacy and Citizen Participation, Chapter 3 World Neighbors, Oklahoma, USA.

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The more you talk about this with your colleagues, the more you begin to see politics as part of our daily lives. We are faced with politics almost everywhere we go. Politics exists wherever there is a group decision to make.

Politics and power are closely intertwined. If politics is what goes on in the process of collective decision-making, it is the powerful that influence this process. The more we work in redistributing power in favor of the disadvantaged, the closer we are to achieving social justice and real democracy.

Political power is very difficult to analyze, as it is not always visible. The less visible the power is, the more difficult it is to deal with.

Following are the manifestations of political power that we need to consider:

- *Visible Power: Observable Decision-Making* is the most straightforward kind of political power. It is simply the person or group that is officially responsible for making the decision. Examples are the CEO who makes a decision to promote a competent staff member; or a parliament that is responsible for passing a certain law. These are the visible (official) powers that are responsible for making such decisions. Of course identifying the official decision-making bodies is not always that clear. As discussed in the next module, advocacy practitioners must identify the official (visible) powers that should take a certain decision. However, passing the buck, or shifting the responsibility to another body, is a common phenomenon that we are all familiar with, which is also a part of the political game.
- *Hidden Power: Setting the Political Agenda* is power that works from behind the scenes to influence the decision. It is usually the powerful groups that get a chance to play this role. Disadvantaged groups are traditionally removed from this process through a process of systemic exclusion. For instance, these groups almost have no chance to make their voices heard in the venues of mass media. Their absence from the media gives the impression that their point of view is not the mainstream. Advocacy and practitioners need to either create alternative media venues to voice these groups' concerns, or help them get organized to show the power of their numbers in attracting the attention of the media.
- *Invisible Power: Shaping Meaning* is the most difficult form of power. It is the power that shapes people's minds and the way they think. It is through this process that many disadvantaged groups have very low self-esteem and consequently a profound feeling of powerlessness. Women, in many cultures, feel inferior to men. Some ethnic and indigenous groups almost inherit this profound feeling of being inferior to other groups. "Processes of socialization" (VeneKlasen & Miller 2002) explain, "culture, and ideology perpetuate exclusion and inequity by defining what is normal, acceptable, and safe."



Figure 8: Invisible Power Is Seen When We Internalize Our Inferiority without Being Aware We Do That.
Technical Idea: Iman Mandour & Nader Tadros; Artistic Idea: Golo.

Working against these beliefs and cultural norms is always received by resistance and will lead to encountering politics. The first step – and the most difficult one – you need to do is to help the community realize that there is an injustice that needs to be addressed. There are many successful examples of addressing such difficult injustices. Think of examples in your region that have already been tackled, or have achieved great progress. How was this done? What means were used to uncover these injustices and have them addressed?

Clever politicians know how to play on all manifestations of power to increase their power and control the political decision.

We cannot separate advocacy from the power and politics 'games' around us. In fact, it is a huge mistake to do that. If so, we would rather equip ourselves to engage in this game and use it (in the good sense of the word) to tackle the difficult issues of injustice we are all dealing with in our work.