

**ADVOCATING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE:
A SPECIAL RESPONSIBILITY OF CIVIL SOCIETY**

*Statement of the Seventeenth Annual Johns Hopkins
International Fellows in Philanthropy Conference,
Beijing, China, July 11-14, 2005*

Preamble

A major function of civil society organizations is to serve as a force for social justice and social harmony. Social justice lies at the heart of civil society endeavor even though it takes a variety of forms in different settings and at different times. At a minimum, the pursuit of social justice means promoting respect for the worth of each individual and protecting basic human rights—the right to security of one’s person and property, freedom of belief, and freedom of association and expression. Beyond this, however, it has come to mean overcoming inequalities of opportunity and condition, and guaranteeing at least some minimum standard of living and a healthy and secure environment both for those living and those still unborn.

How civil society organizations pursue their social justice mission can differ substantially from place to place depending on political traditions, levels of development, and cultures of participation. Nevertheless, there are enough similarities in the social justice role that civil society organizations perform in different settings to make a general statement of the sort offered here both possible and useful.

More specifically, civil society organizations can pursue their social justice mission through at least two different, though inter-related, routes. The first is through the provision of services such as health care, education, and sustenance to those in need. This is a long-standing function of civil society organizations and retains its importance today.

But civil society organizations do not command sufficient resources to achieve their social justice mission through service provision alone. They must therefore use other means as well both to generate added resources and to alter the underlying conditions that create injustice and inequality in the first place. And one of the most important of these other means is *social justice advocacy*, the mobilization of citizens to encourage changes in government policy and in business behavior that will enhance social justice.

This Statement explores this social justice advocacy function of nonprofit organizations. More specifically, it seeks, first, to define more precisely what this function entails and what forms it can usefully take; second, to outline some of the obstacles that impede its exercise; and third, to suggest some steps that can be taken—by civil society organizations themselves, by foundations, by the business community, and by governments—to encourage its more effective exercise. The Statement emerged from the work of the Seventeenth Annual Johns Hopkins International Fellows in Philanthropy Conference held in Beijing, China, in July 2005. Over 100 civil society practitioners and experts from China and more than 30 other countries around the world took part in the deliberations that led to this Statement and contributed to its content. While we are aware of the different meanings of social justice and the different circumstances that confront social justice advocacy in different countries, we believe it is still possible to

delineate some general guidelines for such activity. It is in this spirit, and with these caveats, that we offer the observations below.

I. The Social Justice Advocacy Role of Civil Society Organizations

Social justice advocacy essentially involves overcoming inequities in the distribution of power or resources. This can be done either by mobilizing people to relieve or mitigate the results of such inequities after the inequities appear or working to change the conditions that produce the inequities in the first place. Either way, such activity can take place at multiple levels: first, at the grassroots level; second, among mid-level organizations that mediate between the grassroots and the formal structures of power; and third, at the policy-making and policy-implementation levels. Social justice advocacy can be implemented in both public and private organizations.

More specifically, the social justice advocacy role of civil society organizations can usefully embrace at least the following kinds of activities:

1) Raising awareness

Injustice must be perceived to be acted upon. Often those experiencing injustice do not perceive it as such because of a lack of information about possibilities or conditions elsewhere or a lack of agreement on what the standards of justice are. A first step in social justice advocacy is therefore to raise consciousness about injustices both among those affected and the broader public, to help those experiencing injustice become aware of their situation and of the options for change, and to make others aware of the consequences that prevailing injustices are having.

2) Researching the root causes of injustice

Raising awareness about the existence of inequalities and inequities is only a first step toward effective social justice advocacy. Equally important is to identify the root causes of these inequities. This frequently requires careful fact-gathering and research as well as careful analysis of results. And such research is often best carried out in a participatory fashion, in cooperation with the people affected.

3) Disseminating findings

Facts do not often speak for themselves. They must be interpreted and disseminated. Evidence of inequality and understandings of its causes must therefore be dissemination to those directly affected so that people come to understand the link between the injustices they experience and the advocacy efforts required to correct them. But dissemination must also reach beyond those directly affected to the broader public. This makes development of an independent mass media and the effective use of the mass media a critical part of successful social justice advocacy.

4) Creating capacity

Effective advocacy requires concrete skills and solid organization. The precise nature of these skills will vary from place to place. But almost everywhere they will include familiarity with the local context, an ability to relate to grassroots communities, effective communications skills, knowledge of public decision mechanisms, access to communications technology, an ability to mobilize people and resources, and an understanding of how to build effective organizations.

5) **Building networks and partnerships**

Advocacy is most effective when done through networks. Networks allow organizations to multiply their power and their resources. Civil society organizations engaged in social justice advocacy therefore have to learn how to reach out to other civil society organizations, to businesses, to the media, to cultural workers, and to portions of the government itself in order to take their message forward. Increasingly, moreover, social justice advocacy organizations can benefit from alliances with counterparts in other countries to generate information, legitimize their activities, and bring added pressure to bear in promoting domestic change.

6) **Influencing decisions**

The implementation of social justice advocacy can take a variety of forms. These can include *modeling change through pilot programs, organizing public forums, conducting information campaigns, organizing mass demonstrations, issuing reports, writing opinion articles in the media, testifying before government agencies, meeting with government officials, and forming partnerships with government agencies.*

7) **Monitoring outcomes**

Social justice advocacy does not end with the making of decisions. The consequences of these decisions must also be carefully monitored and the results of this monitoring fed back into the advocacy process.

II. Barriers to Social Justice Advocacy

While the social justice advocacy role of civil society organizations is widely accepted, it is not always widely practiced. This is so because of the considerable barriers that often stand in the way of such advocacy. These barriers can take a variety of forms:

1) **Challenges to legitimacy**

In the first place, civil society advocacy can suffer from a lack of legitimacy, whether real or perceived. The perceived legitimacy of civil society advocacy for social justice can be challenged on a number of different fronts:

- Insufficient legal protections for civil society organizations or inadequate administration of the legal protections that exist;
- Perceived lack of representational structures linking civil society organizations to those on whose behalf they claim to speak;
- Lack of media attention and resulting limited public perception of civil society organizations and their capabilities;
- Inappropriate questioning of the motives of those engaged in social justice advocacy by those who are its targets;
- A sense that advocacy is “political” in nature and not the business of civil society organizations; lack of acceptance of civil society organizations as legitimate actors in the “political” arena;
- Lack of political expertise on the part of civil society organizations.

2) Insufficient resources

A second crucial barrier to social justice advocacy is the limited availability of resources to support it. Civil society organizations typically find it easier to generate support for direct service activities than for advocacy activities, even though the advocacy activities can have the potential for greater impact. Both the human and financial resources for social justice advocacy can be limited. Advocacy is a long-term undertaking that depends importantly on building relationships of trust. Support for such long-term activity is often difficult to find and, once found, difficult to sustain, particularly in conditions of poverty.

3) Fragmentation among advocacy organizations

While advocacy is most effective when done in collaboration, those engaged in social justice advocacy sometimes find it difficult to make common cause. Issues of tactics and credibility, personality conflicts, and organizational competition for credit or resources can often get in the way of effective coalitions.

4) Unresponsive institutions

Ultimately, effective advocacy requires responsiveness on the part of those in positions of authority, whether in public or private institutions. Oftentimes those in such positions are not responsive to advocacy pressures or are inaccessible to those who are doing the advocating. In addition, advocates are often denied the information they need to target their advocacy most effectively. Even when decision-makers are responsive to advocacy, moreover, administrative systems may be incapable, or unwilling, to execute the decisions reached.

III. Steps Toward More Effective Social Justice Advocacy

To overcome these barriers to effective social justice advocacy on the part of civil society organizations, a number of steps are needed. What is more, actions are needed by a number of different actors.

A. Foundations and Philanthropic Institutions

In the first place, foundations and other philanthropic institutions can play a vital role in promoting social justice advocacy. They can do so in a variety of ways:

- By engaging in direct advocacy initiatives themselves to advocate the needs of the groups they are supporting not simply by making grants but also by participating in policy dialogues, lawmaking activities, and media campaigns.
- By increasing their support for social justice advocacy and the research, community organizing, and dissemination efforts on which it must be based;
- By supporting capacity-building and networking among civil society organizations engaged in social justice advocacy;
- By helping to forge alliances within the foundation community and between it and other sectors in support of social justice advocacy activities;
- By helping civil society organizations engaged in social justice advocacy gain access to centers of

power in government and the business sector;

- By linking civil society organizations engaged in social justice advocacy across national borders, thereby making it possible to put added pressure on domestic governments to respond;

B. Government

Governments also have important responsibilities in facilitating social justice advocacy. Most critically, they must leave sufficient space for such advocacy. They can do so in a variety of ways:

- By strengthening the legal right of civil society organizations to engage in social justice advocacy activities;
- By making available the information that civil society organizations need to engage effectively in advocacy efforts. This can be done directly or through the media and can usefully be reinforced by “freedom-of-information” laws or regulations that give civil society organizations the standing to sue in courts of law to request information from public authorities;
- By providing civil society organizations engaged in social justice advocacy access to public decision processes in a timely manner and by providing consultative mechanisms to encourage citizen input to decision;
- By providing resources to conduct research, monitor public decisions, and communicate with citizens on important public matters.

C. Civil Society Organizations

Finally, civil society organizations themselves must take steps to reduce the barriers to effective social justice advocacy. They can do so in the following ways:

- By making social justice advocacy a priority within civil society organizations;
- By involving the people affected by the advocacy in the advocacy activity and making sure that representational procedures are in place that engage citizens in formulating advocacy agendas and ensure that advocacy remains responsive to grassroots concerns and that grassroots support for advocacy remains strong;
- By grounding their advocacy in solid information, objectively developed and fairly portrayed. Advocacy that is based on hear-say or innuendo can undermine the credibility of the case that advocates are making;
- By operating in an ethical and transparent manner and avoiding scandals or misuse of organizational funds or authority. Social justice advocacy can be a contentious process. Opponents will therefore seize on any sign of corruption or unethical behavior to try to discredit those who engage in social justice advocacy and undermine the message they are trying to convey. Social justice advocates must therefore be above reproach and pay particular attention to their standards of conduct and the openness and honesty with which they conduct their business.
- By perfecting their skills and capacities, including their communications skills, their grass-roots organizing skills, their internal management skills, and their capacity to document their

performance. The success of social justice advocacy rests not alone on the credibility of the message that social justice advocates convey, but also on the credibility of the organizations that convey it;

- By reaching out to others in the civil society sector, in government, and in the business community to build bridges in support of social justice advocacy efforts. This requires a willingness to share credit as well as a capacity to compromise where necessary, to see issues from others' perspectives, and to manage the complex collaborations that social justice advocacy often requires;

IV. Conclusion

The promotion of social harmony and the pursuit of social justice are crucial tasks in modern society, especially given social and economic trends that seem to be increasing inequalities among peoples and intensifying social tensions. In this context, civil society and philanthropic organizations have a special role to play as agents of social justice. This role can take many different forms, but one of the most important of them is that of advocating on behalf of the disadvantaged. Such social justice advocacy is often essential to make progress on social justice issues. But it requires an exceptional range of skills, careful grounding in the communities being served, and supportive links with other elements of society.

Hopefully, the ideas outlined here can help strengthen social justice advocacy and clarify the important role it performs in helping societies achieve social harmony and guarantee opportunities for all.

Agreed to this 14th day of July 2005, Beijing, China

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The following individuals took part in the deliberations that led to the development of this Statement and generally concur with its observations and conclusions. They do so in their individual capacities and not as the representatives of any organizations with which they may be associated or that may have supported their work.

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