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A New Weave of Power, People & Politics: The Action Guide for Advocacy and Citizen Participation, by Lisa VeneKlasen with Valerie Miller

Reviewed by John Ruthrauff, InterAction

In recent years many development organizations have adopted a rights-based development methodology. This requires understanding new concepts and designing new strategies for implementation. *A New Weave of Power, People & Politics*,¹ by Lisa VeneKlasen and Valerie Miller, a guide on advocacy and citizen participation, gives nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) an incredibly useful resource to understand and implement this core element of rights-based development. The authors identify this advocacy approach as “an organized political process that involves the coordinated efforts of people to change policies, practices, ideas and values that perpetuate inequality, prejudice and exclusion.”

The three-page section entitled *Navigating the Action Guide*, which summaries key concepts that also provide a preview each section, demonstrates the guide’s practical, hands-on nature. The guide includes 40 exercises to facilitate the advocacy process and has examples from dozens of countries. It also deftly calls upon the authors’ 50 years of combined experience from conducting advocacy throughout the world. The guide is a necessary addition to any reading list for staff working on advocacy in field offices, policy departments and with partner organizations.

The first section provides an overview of the concepts of politics and advocacy, democracy and citizenship, power and empowerment, and constructing empowering strategies. While gender is included in the section on power analysis, examples and analysis of gender issues are present throughout the book, woven into the content as an integral part of advocacy. The authors draw on the writings of an international range of advocacy thinkers and practitioners including Hope Chigudu from Zimbabwe, John Samuel from the National Centre of Advocacy Studies in India, Margaret Schuler from Overseas Education Fund International and John Gaventa from the Institute for Development Studies in Sussex, England.

For development practitioners section two is especially helpful, providing examples of tools for planning advocacy campaigns that build on an organization’s political vision and advocacy strengths and weaknesses. The checklists for political credibility and constituent credibility are particularly useful. The guide uses “structural analysis” to analyze outside ideological, political, and economic factors with exercises such as *Naming the Powerful* and developing a *Historical Analysis of the Political Landscape*.

The authors address the issue of defining the targeted problem in a clear and delimited way. They point out that “... many advocacy strategies have difficulty in achieving their goals because the problem they seek to address:

- is not clearly defined or understood;
- is not perceived as a priority problem by a large number of people – especially by excluded groups whom the advocacy is intended to benefit; and
- is not narrowed down sufficiently to a *specific issue* with a workable strategy.”

The authors also provide examples of problem statements from Ghana, India and Zimbabwe, and exercises examining the anatomy of a problem, developing an access and control profile, problem identification tools, and use of focus groups.

As the guide explains, analyzing and selecting priority issues involves “... looking at the causes and impact of problems as well as analyzing solutions. You need to decide which strategy is feasible for your group and which offers the most political gain”. Advocates tend to focus on specific policy decisions to the detriment of broader issues. Veneklasen and Miller stress the holistic nature of advocacy, reminding us that policy is only one, albeit an important, dimension of rights-based advocacy. Their *Advocacy Impact Chart* helps us examine the impact of advocacy on issues such as political space, culture, civil society and the individual. Exercises analyze the needs and potential of marginalized groups, enable problem identification and prioritization, and examine the causes, consequences and solutions to those problems.

The authors examine different political systems and their “entry points,” such as national policy-making, courts, bureaucracy, and political parties. Phases of policy-making include agenda setting, formulation and enactment, implementation, and monitoring and enforcement. The guide also provides an overview of budget analysis, international policy-making advocacy, and women’s human rights advocacy. Veneklasen and Miller point out that “[a]lthough a key advocacy goal is to create opportunities for citizen’s groups to be directly engaged in policy processes, engagement does not always impact policy decisions in the end. It is easy to believe that access to policymakers will translate into influence, but in practice this is rarely true”. In fact, many NGOs, both north and south, make this very mistake in their dialogues with the World Bank and other international agencies. The concept of claimed space versus invited space is particularly timely. If an organization forces its way to the decision-making table (claimed space), it is more likely to have influence than if the policymakers invite organizations to a dialogue. The latter rarely provides the opportunity for effective advocacy since it leaves the policy-makers in control.

The final section, *Doing Advocacy, Building Clout: Message, Tactics and Organization*, covers the media, lobbying and negotiations, advocacy leadership development, and building alliances. The media overview provides recommendations for framing and delivering your message, choosing the right medium, and mass media advocacy, with examples from Croatia and the Philippines. It also provides basic information concerning news conferences, letters to the editor, television and radio interviews, and alternative media.

A New Weave is one of the best available guides providing an overview of the advocacy process as well as concrete recommendations for implementation. The 340-page book can be ordered through Stylus Publishing at 1-800-232-0223 in the US or at <http://www.styluspub.com>.

Prior to joining InterAction, the author was Oxfam America Director of Advocacy, and, prior to that, Director the Center for Democratic Education, an international advocacy capacity-building NGO working in Central America and the Caribbean.

¹ The guide is available for purchase through Stylus Publishing at 1-800-232-0223 in the US or <http://www.styluspub.com>.