



A Just Associates session
AWID Forum, "How Does Change Happen?"
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Strategic Opportunity or Black Hole?

Assessing Policy Spaces to Advance Women's Rights

Summary Overview

The successes achieved by social justice advocates at a series of important UN and other international gatherings throughout the 1990s molded transnational civil society strategies and in many ways, raised expectations about what is possible. In addition to policy gains, these efforts managed to shift the discourses of gender equality, sustainable development, and human rights and helped to forge national and international movements and alliances. Since 2001, however, while campaigns may be more polished in some ways, international policy processes seem to yield fewer successes and more frustrations for civil society activists. As organizations grapple with the difficult questions of where and how to invest their scarce resources, they are thinking ever more critically about how change happens and how to be more selective and strategic about policy work and advocacy broadly. This dialogue among 35+ women's rights and social justice advocates and supporters, convened by Just Associates at the AWID Forum in October 2005 in Bangkok, set out to explore what makes a global policy space strategic in the current context and which policy spaces turn out to be "black holes" that sap or divert the energy of women's movements and potentially undermine their change efforts over time. What made global policy opportunities and civil society strategies in the 1990s bear fruit and what has changed since then? What are the range of strategies beyond policy engagement needed today to build and use the kind of political power necessary to produce and sustain real changes for women's rights, equality and sustainable development?

Looking back over the 1990s, global women's rights activists can't help but feel a sense of nostalgia for the good old days. The participation of women's rights leaders and activists in the UN Conferences at Rio, Vienna, Cairo, Beijing and Copenhagen was instrumental in securing a new overarching policy framework for women's human rights and shifting the discourse for gender and development more broadly. These successes – fragile as they may seem today – helped to open up numerous other opportunities for civil society participation in policy processes at global levels from the UN to the World Bank and beyond.

Yet advocacy experiences in more recent years raise questions about the continued relevance of these new and not-so-new policy openings for advancing women's rights and other social justice agendas today. Participants in this session doubted the strategic value of many current policy engagements, from the efforts surrounding the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to those connected to the World Trade Organization (WTO). Several participants felt that many of these global processes have become policy "black holes", diverting advocates and resources from more pressing political issues. What's more, many felt that the focus on policy and campaigning has reduced advocacy to either a technical or a messaging task, contributing to a general depoliticization of social justice strategies and a growing disconnect between local, national and global work, and between advocates and social movements.

A basic framework for assessing policy spaces was introduced to further stimulate the discussion. Developed by scholars and activists¹ who critically evaluated civil society involvement in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Processes (PRSPs) promoted at country levels by the World Bank over the last several years, the framework categorizes policy spaces according to who controls the agenda and distinguishes between **closed**, **invited**, **claimed** or **autonomous**.

A **closed space** is one where policy decisions are made by an elite group, such as government officials, behind closed doors without any pretense of broadening the boundaries of public participation. Despite efforts by civil society to inject transparency and public consultation into policymaking, "expert-driven" opaque policy space is the norm for many governments, as well as in global economic and security policy processes.

Civil society groups have challenged and pried open policy processes to create **claimed spaces** where there is enough room to negotiate their own agendas. The well-known participatory budget work in Porto Alegre, Brazil is one of the best-known examples of a claimed space, but many aspects of UN-related organizing in the past managed to *claim* policy spaces. In addition, civil society creates **autonomous spaces**, independent of official policy processes, including the World Social Forum and the Global Call Against Poverty (G-CAP). Claimed spaces, like the AWID Forum that started under the sponsorship of the US Agency for International Development (USAID), can be taken over and reinvented as an autonomous space by civil society.

With growing pressure from civil society over the last decade, powerful policy institutions have established **invited spaces** where a select group of civil society actors, usually from larger NGOs, are invited to participate in a policy consultation hosted by officials. The overall agendas and scope of decisions are ultimately controlled by the official institutions and are often not open to change or negotiation. While invited spaces can offer possibilities for influence and networking, they rarely produce long-term results on vital justice issues. The more pressing danger, however, is that they can serve to legitimize the *status quo* and divert civil society energies and resources from more pressing policy and political matters. Workshop participants felt that this is precisely the problem with the UN promoted Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the World Bank's (PRSPs) in the sense that a narrow agenda is pre-set and the scope of discussion is circumscribed so that other related and central policy concerns are excluded. As one person described the process, "Officials invite people to come and give input into an agenda that is already set but not dealing with the real issues."

¹ See Brock, Karen, Andrea Cornwall and John Gaventa, *Power, Knowledge and Political Spaces in the Framing of Poverty Policy*, IDS WP 143, October 2001; "Assessing Entry Points" in *A New Weave of Power, People and Politics* by Valerie Miller and Lisa VeneKlasen, page 208, World Neighbors, 2002; and the workshop report from Citizen Action, Knowledge and Global Economic Power: Intersections of Popular Education, Organizing, and Advocacy, August 2005, produced by Just Associates.

“While Rome Burns”

One participant stressed the opportunity costs of engaging in the PRSPs. Although the PRSP process can serve to strengthen civil society’s analysis of the national budget and planning process, crucial macro-economic decisions deeply affecting poverty and rights are left out of these discussions. In many contexts, as civil society organizations have invested resources in consultations around the PRSP, the national government and the IFIs have moved forward with the privatization of water, healthcare and land without civil society’s participation, and in some cases, minimal legislative involvement. She explained how the real decision-making clout lies within the Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility (PRGF), the International Monetary Fund’s (IMF) lending office for low-income countries and not the PRSPs.

There is a lot of dissipation of energy. We are trying to stop the momentum of our opponents and capture the energy of our allies. But we’re not very clear about what we want which makes it difficult to reach agreement about where to focus.

Many participants in the dialogue felt that **invited** policy spaces had come to consume global justice advocates. Some speakers pointed out that the demands to become increasingly knowledgeable and skillful in these spaces has, at times, has narrowed strategies and overvalued certain skills, like policy research, at the expense of others. There is a feeling that a narrow focus on short-term campaigning, lobbying and technical policy research has reduced investment in and worked to devalue the more

time-consuming tasks of organization-building, effective media strategies, networking, political analysis and awareness raising that deal with visible aspects of power. More comprehensive strategies are needed to rebuild linkages between advocates and constituencies, and strengthen democratic and dynamic leadership and membership in grassroots social movements that are critical to the kind of sustained effort needed to transform policy commitments into reality. An over-emphasis on global policy process not only reduces connections with local constituencies, but can also exacerbate distrust between global advocates and grassroots allies or social movements.

Given scarce resources, choices and trade-offs are inevitable for civil society actors. What makes prioritizing tricky is the fact that politics and power are always in flux. Thus, there is a greater need by NGOs for flexibility and agility than current planning practices and donor pressures allow. Participants emphasized the need to return to longer-term visions, agendas and strategies and to “getting involved in timely but broader political issues like the Iraq war, US unilateralism, neoliberalism and patriarchy.” One person suggested refining the policy spaces framework to develop more subtle categories – such as **invaded, synergised, discourse-oriented, and reformative spaces** - to better illustrate the shifting political dynamics shaping policy work at all levels. A better understanding and balance between the interconnected tasks of “winning” and “building” as well as more in-depth and continuous political analysis may help prevent groups falling down the black hole of policy engagement.

You may engage and then decide to disengage. There is no absolute final choice. Politics are never constant.

Challenging Corporate Agendas

While groups have been preoccupied with intergovernmental policy processes, a few participants emphasized how transnational corporations have made extraordinary advances with their own agendas, including narrowing the options and priorities on the official policy agenda, without transparency or public accountability. The PRSP, PRGF and the WTO have been used to expand corporate access and influence, and to advance a fundamentally ideological agenda of privatization, deregulation and liberalization.

Although innovative corporate accountability work is growing, a participant from Central America questioned why women rights activists were not more involved and visible in these efforts, and why women, as major household consumers, have not been tapped as a potentially powerful constituency. How can women consumers become a more politically active constituency in these movements? Does this suggest shifting some energy away from official development policy processes and toward consumer and corporate advocacy?

There is a profound disconnect between these large global campaigns and women in the village. The distance between Delhi and New York is easy to overcome but the distance between Delhi and the Indian village keeps growing.

From Where We Sit: Questions of Representation

Another ongoing challenge facing global advocates is the issue of representation – who speaks for

A poor woman in Bangladesh may be familiar with some *policy speak*, but the NGO staff that ‘represent’ her are expected to be fluent in this language. Sometimes our policy fluency impairs our ability to communicate with constituencies and to envision bigger political changes.

whom, about what and who decides? How are we located in these policy spaces with regard to our own identity, knowledge and language? Most advocates represent their NGO and are usually not the people they speak “on behalf of.” Therefore, their roles in these spaces can be contradictory. They come with different forms of power than those they seek to represent, and rarely have time to speak directly with them. An advocate may be profoundly committed to social change, but their thinking and vision are often dampened by the ever-

narrowed tactical possibilities for change within a **reformative space**. As one participant pointed out that, “NGOs essentially function as a corollary of the international aid system ...the words *policy*, *police* and *patriarchy* are all interrelated and they are about control. In the policy-making space, the rules of the game are constructed to control this space, not transform it. The gains are necessarily limited but may still be important.”

Another participant added, “The problem is that our language, and by extension, our alternative ideas, have been co-opted and distorted in these reformative spaces. Words like *empowerment*, *gender* and *participation* are used with very different meanings by the policy actors we try to change.”

Choosing Policy Engagement Opportunities that Build Movements

What insights can we draw from the 1990s as to *how* to choose and engage in policy spaces that advance women's rights? One participant pointed out that the Vienna Conference on human rights was an important moment for women's movements not because of the conference itself but because of all the organizing, education, alliance-building and agenda-setting that happened before it. For example, a movement had emerged around issues of violence against women long before Vienna and merely *used* the conference as a mechanism to increase visibility and gain recognition for this agenda. As well, the Cairo conference was another key moment for women's rights because the aim of the advocates was to shift the paradigm on women's health rights rather than solely "a myopic focus on a specific policy or issue-based campaign". In this case, injecting language with new meaning into an official policy document was revolutionary.

The Beijing conference in 1995 was considered a success for similar reasons. Many women's groups came together, energized by connecting and learning from one another more than by the official platform process – though that was also vital. A participant explained that in Nicaragua as in many countries, there was an extensive education and organizing campaign which preceded the conference to enable women to make the most of their experience in Beijing. But in recent years in the Central

The movements that were energized by the UN conferences have been so ground down that they lack the *oomph* to take over these policy spaces.

American context, she said, "there has been a grinding down of social movements", weakening them to the point where they have little involvement in and power to influence global policy spaces. To make those spaces useful for women's rights, social movements must be strengthened.

From International to Local, National and Regional: Shifting Opportunities for Change

While the 1990s made for effective, if not exciting, advocacy at international levels, perhaps the current reality calls for a return to the local and national levels. One participant observed that with global advocacy increasingly disconnected, local realities are often missing from the global policy arena. There is a sense that movement-building demands starting afresh with the local and then, linking internationally.

A distinguishing element of women's movements is the need to address insecurity and subsistence. Rights and political realities are rooted in the question of livelihood for many women.

One participant talked about the need to *privilege* local spaces. "For a woman in a village, the small victory of getting that access to water can be a transformative moment. As NGOs hop from one issue to another, how can we sustain real social change such as this -- change that is incredibly important. How do we make sure that policy change at whatever level creates real change?" How can it promote new forms of power in terms of awareness, values and organization?

What is winning and for whom? How do we use these 'invited' spaces to mobilize and build alliances?

At the same time, good local organizing should not be disconnected from international gains and struggles. A participant from India talked

about how grassroots women learned and used parts of the UN Convention Against All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) to make the case for women’s issues with police, lawyers and district level officials. “What made this so valuable is that the women themselves explained in their own words and through their own experience what CEDAW is all about.”

Several participants felt that the national policy level was equally problematic for advocates. One person said, “The biggest change in the last 30 yrs is in the national policy arena. In India, the Philippines, etc. this disconnect is growing. I see less and less people from the village in these national spaces. It’s not just a problem at global levels. The larger the disconnect means less policy effectiveness.”

The national level remains a key line of defense against undemocratic global policy intervention.

But how do advocates begin to open up political spaces nationally particularly on women’s rights and development issues? In some contexts, regional bodies may provide opportunities for leverage. One participant noted that the European Union process created a huge opening to introduce progressive legislation at the national level. “It was used as a driving tool that women’s movements in the North were able to mobilize around.”

Another participant closed with a plea for more innovative issues and approaches than have been seemingly possible within the confines of policy work. She used the example of efforts to organize the *Vagina Monologues* in Uganda. In that political context, the controversy and energized public debate that it caused was more powerful than that the actual performance – which was ultimately blocked by the government. At the same time, questions about the backlash and divisiveness between groups it caused also need to be factored in to any assessment of such experiences.

Final Points

The discussion highlighted the importance of political analysis and deliberative decision-making about when, where and how to participate in particular policy spaces. An official invitation to participate does not automatically translate into a meaningful political opportunity. As one participant put it, “Just say no” to *invited* policy opportunities that offer little chance to advance your agenda. It also raised important questions about international policy opportunities relative to regional, national and local levels at this current historical moment. It is critical to evaluate whether engaging in a policy space is the most strategic choice with regard to advancing a long-term agenda or whether those resources could better be invested in other locations and strategies. The word “strategic” goes beyond the question of the potential for policy reform to a full range of political considerations to weigh whether a given policy moment will facilitate movement-building, change language or position women’s rights and social justice advocates better for the long-run. Participants agreed that it was important to revisit long-term visions, agendas and comprehensive strategies as they make the tough choices about short-term tactics and policy engagement. In a world where ideology and patriarchy take on new and ever stronger forms of political power, grassroots organizing and education could not be more important to women’s rights advocates.

Just Associates (JASS) is a fast-growing global advocacy and learning network committed to building movements for democracy, equality and justice by strengthening citizen organizations and leaders. In just 4 years of operation, JASS has become a recognized leader among women's rights and social justice advocates around the world for its innovative strategies, training and practical, cutting-edge thinking about social change.