Interpreting the Rise of International “Advocacy”

Advocacy seems to have become a core term in the vocabulary of international rights. Today the world of international non-governmental organizations is characterized by the imperative to “advocate,” especially in the areas of development and humanitarian aid, as well as the defense of human rights and the environment. As early as 2002, Barry Coates and Rosalind David wrote, “Advocacy work has become the latest enthusiasm for most agencies involved in international aid and development. Over the past decade NGOs have dedicated more resources and given a higher priority to influencing and advocacy work at all levels (local, national, and international levels).” Indeed, in this time “advocacy” has become commonplace well beyond the sphere of English-speakers, together with increased interest in the literature devoted to NGOs and transnational social movements, typified by an emphasis on transnational advocacy networks.

Yet there is something surprising about the meteoric rise in the use of the word “advocacy” for a particularly ill-defined activity. As I will show, there was some initial resistance to the word itself. For a long time, it generated uneasiness outside the English-speaking world. At first, the uneasiness was at the linguistic level, for there is no satisfactory equivalent in many languages. In Latin languages, neither Portuguese nor Italian nor Spanish nor French offered an adequate translation. The word *plaidoyer* is routinely used as the French translation nowadays, but it was still problematic ten years ago. But in addition to linguistic anxiety, in the late 1990s many French NGOs balked at describing their actions in these terms for more significant reasons. The original resistance to “advocacy” thus provides a point of entry into my attempt here to question a term that might seem far more natural to the English-speaker.

The point here is not to defend a proper use of the term nor to express regret at the widespread adoption of English vocabulary simply because I am a French speaker. Nor do I intend to reconstruct a genealogy of the term, which would entail a history of the evolution of the American legal field in the twentieth century that is beyond the scope of this essay. But examining how the term is used, the reasons for its success, the practices it designates, its consistent (or inconsistent) application, as well as the terms to which it is sometimes contrasted, offers useful tools for analyzing certain transformations underway in the world known as “international civil society.” In fact, advocacy is a practice that allows us to define the social basis and concrete embodiments of “international civil society” as a normative ideal. More specifically, it opens a window onto transformations in several partially connected social worlds. Finally, studying the dissemination of the demand for advocacy brings us back to a sensitive
theoretical issue, at the juncture of how ideas circulate in the world and how international aid is sociologically organized. Are we merely describing the circulation of a word, which can be applied to an infinite variety of practices depending on the context in which it is used? Or are we describing a little more, especially specific practices that accompany the word?

Of course, the meaning of the word “advocacy” and the practices it covers are not the same for every organization. The highly critical advocacy in which organizations such as Médecins sans frontières (MSF, Doctors Without Borders) or Oxfam engage has little in common with the far more controlled form of intervention involved in the advocacy promoted by the World Bank. But in fact the variety of its uses is not unlimited. It would be a mistake to assume that a few powerful, independent, and critical actors are representative of the whole world of NGOs, which are varied, to be sure, but also filled with routines partly inherited from the international bureaucracies that endorse or finance them. Is there thus a little more than just a word involved here, as the family resemblance among many advocacy practices of different NGOs suggests? Advocacy, as it has been disseminated, refers at least to a style of promoting causes and interests and to legitimate forms of speaking out for international and local NGOs.

What does the widespread adoption of advocacy in international NGO circles tell us and what does it change? I will divide my discussion into four parts. After discussing the success of the notion, I will analyze how it gave rise to a series of struggles and cleavages over the legitimate forms of NGO speech. I base my conclusions on a survey of documents that refer to advocacy in the professional and international relations literature, combined with earlier research conducted in the world of French humanitarian NGOs and, more recently, with a survey of global justice activists in Africa and in the world of Malian “civil society organizations.” I then proceed to examine whether what seems to be a way of re-enchanting the development industry and the nonprofit sector is not in fact merely an avatar of sector professionalization. I even suggest that the rise of “advocacy” is connected to the processes by which international organizations impose conformity on NGOs.

These institutions favor the existence of a civil society, which must exist if they are to be able to engage in dialogue with it—but the dialogue has to be the right kind. Therefore, understanding the success and uses of “advocacy” in the routine operations of diverse organizations equivalent to “civil society” is far from a matter of noting deviations from an illusory original meaning. Instead, the goal is to grasp the reasons for the success of advocacy within the organizations themselves. In addition to the success of a word, I will survey the stable social forms emerging from the use of advocacy, even when some actors who practice it are often convinced that they are doing it somewhat differently from the others.

The Second Life of Advocacy between Category and Activity

For American readers, the term “advocacy” almost immediately calls to mind the history of civil rights and how a strictly legal conception of defending the individual was expanded into a broader conception of defending rights. Defining its social meaning concerns how “rights” are related to “law”: how the law is used to defend
rights, increase real access to theoretically proclaimed rights, and mobilize support for legislating new rights. Usage also has to be viewed in relation to the evolution of the American legal field and the development of public interest lawyering in the heyday of what Stuart Scheingold famously dubbed “the politics of rights.” An advocate is someone who defends a cause (in the broad sense of the term). As a result, advocacy has come to mean the defense or even the promotion of rights and whatever helps to bring about institutional changes favorable to the defense of rights.

A number of authors have underscored the boom in advocacy among not-for-profit associations in the United States during the 1970s. Writing on the topic of women’s and minority organizations since 1955, Debra Minkoff highlights the exponential growth of advocacy organizations starting in the late 1960s. These organizations tended to replace service organizations that had formerly dominated the sector of volunteer work. In Minkoff’s view, the shift came about as a result of institutional competition: the presence of service organizations lent legitimacy to the development of advocacy, and increasing protest movements during the 1950s and 1960s encouraged demands to be conveyed in a more moderate form through advocacy.

The history of advocacy is not linear, nor is it solely grounded in the field of American law, but the latter has nevertheless significantly shaped it. This was demonstrated, for example, by transformations within the legal profession, initially in the United States, resulting in a form of aggiornamento in the 1980s and 1990s that helped re-enchant the profession embodied in the movement of “cause lawyering.”

The itinerary of the term throughout the world of international aid beginning in the late 1980s not only made its use more widespread but also introduced it as a category of NGO action. Indeed, advocacy appeared as a new category of international aid that emerged at the end of the 1980s. A working paper put out by the World Bank in 1989 distinguished among five categories: community associations, policy advocacy groups, service provider/intermediary, contractors, and cooperatives. The World Bank sought to differentiate between organizations present on the ground and those limited to advocacy (at the time, the distinction was not necessarily favorable to the latter in the Bank’s view). The World Bank Operational Directive 14.70, “Involving Nongovernmental Organizations in World Bank-Supported Activities,” indicates, “While most NGOs with which the Bank works are implementation organizations, some NGOs focus primarily on the advocacy of specific changes in policies or approaches to development.” The term “advocacy” thus seems to have belonged to the vocabulary used by major international donors to define their relationship to the NGO sector and to the actors claiming to represent civil society, at a time when such institutions were being widely criticized. I have in mind, in particular, the attempts to give renewed legitimacy to the World Bank, which led to co-opting some NGO representatives and revising the Washington consensus by introducing greater emphasis on human rights. In the early 1990s, certain USAID programs included an advocacy index.

On the NGO side, use of the term “advocacy” developed rapidly starting in the late 1980s, but the vocabulary did not come into widespread use until the 1990s.
Although Oxfam appears to have recognized the need for campaigning by the mid-1980s, as Maggie Black demonstrates, the term “advocacy” was seldom used.\textsuperscript{19}

In the 1990s, the conversion to advocacy gradually led to the creation of specific departments with officers in charge of advocacy within NGO organizations. In France, this phenomenon was observed even later, in the 2000s. The Catholic Committee against Hunger and for Development (CCFD) transformed its Theme-Based Relations Department, set up in 1998 to “capitalize on experiences of supporting partners and education in development,” into the Department of Studies and Advocacy in 2008.\textsuperscript{20} Similarly, Handicap International (HI) created a management position in political action and advocacy in 2003.

The expanded scope of the term and wider use of the word opened up opportunities for careers in advocacy. Today, a web search on the term “advocacy officer” will bring up a myriad of recruitment offers systematically designating positions in NGOs, foundations, or as representatives of the Third Sector and civil society working to improve the lives of the poor and the disadvantaged. This phenomenon must be seen alongside the professionalization of the field of human rights, which started in the United States. It is in evidence in the development of professional advocacy in the area of human rights (embodied by the rapid rise of Human Rights Watch versus the older Amnesty International model).\textsuperscript{21} The extension of the field of human rights was also connected to its relationship with the scope of United Nations authority and partially linked to investments in this area by private foundations, especially the Ford Foundation and its evolution toward “rights-based” advocacy.\textsuperscript{22} Professionalization did not necessarily mean neutralization: it indicates above all a transformation in modus operandi and “an institutional and social environment in which activism and struggle mainly involved recourse to the law,” as well as a process that the term “jurisdictionalization” accurately conveys.\textsuperscript{23}

Finally, the term coincided with the large-scale international mobilization campaigns initiated by NGOs, primarily during the 1990s: the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL), for which leading organizations were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1997; the campaign for the ratification of the International Criminal Court (1995–98); the Jubilee Campaign calling for cancellation of unpayable poor country debts (1996–2000); the campaign for access to antiretroviral drugs; and so forth.\textsuperscript{24}

In the discourse of aid workers in the countries of the South, the term also refers to the period at the end of the 1990s, when use of the Logical Framework Approach (LFA) was widely imposed, particularly in French-speaking areas, to manage cycles of NGO projects financed by major international donors insisting on aid efficiency. The LFA developed a conception of development work manufactured through “projects,” each of them considered through specific and general objectives, with objective quantitative indicators. But it has since been criticized for its problem-centered approach, its proximity to New Public Management formats, and its bureaucratic fetishism. Here advocacy was a part of what could be included in projects to enhance specific objectives.

Another indicator of the term’s success was the development between 1996 and 1999 of a considerable body of expert literature devoted to advocacy in the world of
NGOs and nonprofit associations. Journals such as *Disasters* and *Development in Practice* were filled with articles on advocacy, its proper forms, its North-South organization, its influence, and its assessment. Some even promoted alternative definitions of the notion, ones not exclusively focused on its capacity to influence decisions.

Has widespread use of the term been accompanied by a stable definition of “advocacy”? Consider how the French Oxfam website presents its work (the case of Oxfam France was not chosen at random; in France, the term “advocacy” is clearly experienced as an English-language import, initially not a very natural addition and without any obvious equivalent in French):

Oxfam France aims to influence political and economic decisionmakers (ministers, parliamentary representatives, advisors, etc.) by presenting realistic alternatives and concrete solutions to persuade them to change their strategies and their positions. By offering the media a different view of the consequences of political choices, we are helping to provide more objective and more complete information to the public.

Influence on political choices: this is a typical—although very vague—definition of advocacy adopted by contemporary NGOs that claim to be seeking changes in public policy. Most definitions contain the idea that it is necessary to go beyond mere program implementation in order to deal with underlying problems.

At the same time, it is hard to find a clear-cut definition of advocacy. In interviews, NGO actors often hesitate about the proper scope of advocacy, whether or not it should include lobbying, a privileged relationship with authorities and intervention in public policymaking, or educating the general public through communication campaigns. The term “advocacy” is defined just as much by what it is not (for example, lobbying or fundraising) as by what it is. Similar uncertainty can also be found in more or less all-encompassing dictionary definitions that tend to link advocacy to public policy or to public defense of a cause.

This uncertainty, however, did not keep social scientists from increasingly turning to the notion of advocacy in the 1990s in order to designate contemporary forms of international mobilization. (Conversely, a bibliographical search returns no works dealing with advocacy by that name in the 1980s.) Consider, for example, the notion of “Transnational Advocacy Networks” (TAN), coined by Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, which they define as follows: “Advocates plead the cause of others or defend a cause or proposition. Advocacy captures what is unique about transnational networks: they are organized to promote causes, principled ideas, and norms, and they often involve individuals advocating political change that cannot be easily linked to a rationalist understanding of their interests.” These three aspects—a normative dimension, recourse to information and expertise, and pleading a cause in the interest of others—went into the construction of the concept of “transnational advocacy networks,” which was presumed to apply in particular to NGOs rather than mass movements.

It was no coincidence, therefore, that Keck’s and Sikkink’s book concentrated on human rights and the environment. In both areas, the central focus was on the need...
for expertise and the possibility of relying on a corpus of (unevenly applied) international standards to promote one’s cause (which typically refers to the dialectic between rights and law). Moreover, these were areas in which the changes within major international aid institutions, above all the World Bank, were decisive, if one considers the weight that the World Bank has had in the two domains of human rights and environment since the beginning of the 1990s.

Since the initial stabilization of the social-scientific meaning of the terms, more recent definitions of “advocacy” have been less stringent. Consider for instance the following definition, which clearly trivializes advocacy: “the term ‘advocacy’ suggests systematic efforts (as opposed to sporadic outbursts) by actors that seek to further specific policy goals.” But it is striking to note that trivializing the notion reveals how close advocacy comes—in practice—to lobbying, even when the advocates make every effort to distinguish their work from a moral standpoint.

This second life of advocacy, both as a general category and as a reference to a specific range of practices, shows how it stands at the intersection of the world of mobilization and the world of transnational public policies, in particular that of international development. This spread of the category has, however, encountered some resistance.

**Between Witnessing and Advocacy**

How does one speak the language of rights? Just as “tradition” provided the dominant lexicon for human rights claims in the eighteenth century, “advocacy” seems to have become a key term of the contemporary language of rights. In addition, for NGOs, a whole set of dilemmas congeals around this term, in particular regarding their own legitimacy (and the legitimacy of their practices and their way of advocating), as well as the nature of their relationship to the political sphere and to those in whose name they speak.

On what basis precisely can an NGO speak out and hope to be taken seriously? This is indeed the question raised by the study of advocacy. Examining the “manufacturing of NGO speech” implies understanding the kind of expertise and legitimacy mobilized by NGO spokespersons to make themselves heard, as well as the tone, methods, and know-how on which these organizations rely. The art of speaking out is often practiced by organizations with very different traditions and identities, however, which partly explains why the world of international NGOs has not always welcomed advocacy.

One example is particularly revealing with regard to the tensions surrounding the legitimate forms of NGO speech in relation to advocacy. Advocacy was essentially perceived among French-based transnational NGOs—first and foremost MSF, alongside Médecins du Monde (MDM)—in contradistinction to witnessing. Notwithstanding the fact that the notion of witnessing may have been the subject of internal debates, it was often used to buttress the public identity of these humanitarian organizations without borders. In the early 1970s, MSF’s founding was justified by the “duty to bear witness” to human rights violations in Biafra, in opposition to the principle of silent neutrality and the bureaucratic red tape of the Red Cross. Similarly, in the early 1980s, when MDM was founded following a split within MSF, with the
explicit purpose of “both providing care and bearing witness,” it claimed to be reaching back “to the original spirit” behind the group. These humanitarian organizations claimed they were able to intervene in the public arena because they were present in the field, and their presence was justified by their medical skills. This is what they meant by “bearing witness,” which could be summed up as a twofold claim to skill and personal testimony.34

Of course, as it is foregrounded in the discourse of French humanitarian NGOs, the meaning of “bearing witness” is by no means as straightforward as is often suggested. It does not merely convey to the public eyewitness testimony from humanitarian volunteers to victims’ suffering.35 There is a division of labor within all international organizations that also affects the way public positions are developed and the way they relate to action on the ground. Similarly, the meaning assigned to bearing witness differs from one humanitarian organization to the next: the account of a simple volunteer in the field is a far cry from that of someone led to speak before the international media. Notwithstanding these nuances, the term has helped to “brand” the identity of these organizations. If the notion of bearing witness was challenged, it was only as part of a “house tradition” that one might wish to break away from.

This was not the case for advocacy, which was experienced as a novelty that had arrived from outside. In 1998, some members of MSF and MDM France explicitly rejected the term “advocacy,” poked fun at it, and expressed a certain wariness. What did they mean in doing so? In their eyes, advocacy was too “human rights” and not enough “on-the-ground.” The notion of advocacy was not rejected solely on intellectual grounds but also because it was being promoted by a very specific group of personnel within these organizations. The objections against it (too “human rights” and not enough “on-the-ground”) were a foil meant to denounce both the rise of young graduates in law and international relations, who were viewed with wariness because they lacked the associations’ medical identity, and the increasing visibility of human rights advocacy organizations that were not rooted in fieldwork. Such objections also reflected the tensions between two legal corpuses (human rights law versus humanitarian law).

In opposition to what they perceived as an “off-the-ground” conception of speaking out, bearing witness as defined by these NGOs, though it gave their discourse weight and value, also carried a potential cost. Indeed, if any action can theoretically provide a basis for bearing witness, humanitarian organizations are also well aware that supplementing it with advocacy can compromise their field missions: it is difficult to remain on the ground after denouncing massive violations of the rights of the populations one is aiding. Bearing witness presupposes the idea of proximity, much more than advocacy does. The legitimacy of witnesses derives from their personal testimony, their presence on the ground, in the places where the deeds they describe have taken place, along with their commitment to the truth of what they say.

The tension between witnessing and advocacy surged not simply due to external causes but within the international network of the two organizations. Some national sections (notably MSF’s Dutch section) began to distance themselves from the position of the French parent section and move closer to a more rights-based
approach.\textsuperscript{36} The debate on this issue became so widespread internally that MSF International ended up publishing a series of “public positions” in an effort to overcome the cleavage between bearing witness and advocacy by adopting a third term.

\textbf{Advocacy, Justice, and Informational Privilege}

Beyond the specific case of the humanitarian organizations without borders and the fact that the word “advocacy” can indicate both taking a stand and expressing opposition, there are substantial differences between the ideal-typical forms of advocacy and bearing witness regarding the relative roles of words and deeds. On the one hand, advocacy does not necessarily presuppose a presence in the field: there can be “desk” advocacy officers, in the sense in which we speak of “desk” journalists, engaged in activist reporting and all the more able to denounce a situation since their organizations have no one on the ground and can build upon the fieldwork of others. Moreover, advocacy may correspond to what was once known as silent diplomacy, warning public authorities without alerting the media or mobilizing public opinion. Though not without exceptions, as Oxfam’s version of it shows, advocacy also involves a division of labor and specializations among organizations, allowing field NGOs to supply information on situations while leaving the task of denouncing them to others who are less exposed. Finally, advocacy also reflects the idea that speaking out and developing a relationship with the authorities require specific skills.

In the end, advocacy and bearing witness both refer to different legal notions: the “trial form,” justice in general, and the fact of speaking on behalf of others.\textsuperscript{37} But they do so from different angles. Interviewees sometimes refer spontaneously to justice, both in the narrow, procedural sense (the trial), and in the wider sense of access to rights, as documented by the following excerpt from an interview I conducted regarding the novel introduction of “advocacy” at the end of the 1990s:

We began hearing about advocacy terminology in the jargon of development in Mali . . . Personally, my experience has led me to understand that [advocacy] came purely and simply from the vocabulary of the courts . . . When a lawyer defends the cause of a client or another person or a government, when he pleads a case, and that plea is nothing other than the advocacy we applied in the jargon of development . . . [When I was young,] I listened to the speeches of the president of Guinea, . . . Ahmed Sékou Touré, with whom I identified. I was nicknamed “Sékou” when I made speeches in high school; I had more verve at the time than I do now. During my student years, people just called me “Counsel Jo,” and even today I am sometimes called that . . .

I asked, “Like a lawyer?” To which my interviewee responded, “Exactly! Like a lawyer!”\textsuperscript{38}

The reference to justice explains why those who claim to be engaged in advocacy see themselves, without any legal training, as lawyers (in French, \textit{avocats}) for just causes, whose expertise or even eloquence will be used to serve the cause and achieve justice. Advocacy therefore lies at the intersection of the two meanings of the French word \textit{droit}—which means both “law” and “right”—opening up a variety of ways of
making demands adapted to democratic as well as authoritarian situations, which are often encountered in the developing world. Yet the reference to advocacy suggests that it is more difficult for the third party—the victims who are defended—to plead their own case (despite a few rare references to self-advocacy in the field), since the term is commonly understood to mean intervening with the authorities on their behalf. As a result, representatives of the countries of the Global South are assigned a special role in major collective advocacy campaigns. They are usually asked to act as witnesses who have been personally affected by the disasters observed and denounced by advocates in the North, rather than as advocates for themselves. This happens even when the representatives of southern countries invited to international conferences are in fact advocacy officers at the local level.

The often judicial framing of advocacy intersects with other determinants of its form and content. NGO advocacy is likely to achieve greater legitimacy when it adopts an expert point of view, as the initiatives of Oxfam or Action Against Hunger on food policy reform suggest. Above all, advocacy, usually relying on expertise and a claim to authenticity—often evidenced by the testimonial of an inhabitant of a southern country affected by long-term trends described more expertly in the North—may prove especially interesting to journalists.

In his ethnography of advocacy, Etienne Ollion clearly shows that most of the work of advocacy officers at international summits consists in supplying spectacular or emotional material or demonstrating expertise on specialized topics in which the journalists lack proficiency, in order to put mediated pressure on leaders (in this case the G8) otherwise beyond their reach:

Even though advocacy officers present at the summit resorted to techniques assumed to be part of the repertoire of consulting firms or corporations, they always presented themselves as representatives of “civil society,” a label whose clear display made them more valuable to the journalists. Because it generally denotes disinterestedness and action on behalf of the masses, the label of NGO—clearly set forth by the officers in their self-presentation—gives to those who resort to it a clear advantage when it comes to the media.

In the same article, Ollion describes how NGO advocacy officers slip into press conferences to ask leaders pointed questions and pressure them to make public commitments, which can be recalled afterward and used against those leaders.

This format, apparently a more controlled, civilized form of critique, is typical of internal criticism. It appears to be more acceptable to the individuals being criticized, since it judges and exhorts them based on their own words and the values they claim to uphold. It makes ongoing interaction possible between authorities and advocates because the latter are not “breaking the framework” of their interaction. Recourse to international human rights standards is one aspect of this form of criticism, embodied by advocacy, which supports its positions by citing the commitments—at least on paper—of governments and international organizations.

Advocacy techniques, in summary, help NGOs maintain a privileged relationship with information in two ways: first, by providing expertise to use against powerful
opponents as well as material for journalists, who are special allies (this expertise partly distinguishes advocacy from bearing witness); second, by engaging in mass communication without the resources available to major public relations firms and those who use them, which implies preserving the label of disinterestedness attached to NGOs, supplying newsworthy information, and even knowing how to take advantage of changes in giant international culture industries sensitive to edutainment formats (mass concerts and so on).44

Is Advocacy Lobbying?

Advocacy refers to a “noble” form of speech, which consists in engaging in an activity that stops short of being lobbying—unless one resorts to lobbyists only so long as they defend good causes, or considers lobbying only one technique among other advocacy techniques (rather than a profession selling services to any cause). For this reason, when the issue of advocacy is raised within an NGO, the members inevitably go to great lengths to make a clear distinction between what constitutes legitimate advocacy and what does not. In order to define advocacy, they end up using categories, both ordinary and professional, that seem less legitimate: lobbying, pressure, interest, influence, communication, and so forth.

Neither lobbying nor advocacy is a monolithic endeavor. The practices encompassed by these terms are largely determined by the type and structure of the resources available to the actors. Whereas foreign policymakers and “major” NGOs can conceivably engage in private and individualized forms of lobbying, such methods are far more difficult to implement in the face of powerful international organizations, or when confronting world leaders at a G8 summit. Similarly, the fact that the NGO sector depends either on public funds or on the generosity of a public loath to see its money go “to the headquarters rather than to fieldwork” ultimately limits the amount of funding potentially available for campaigns perceived as too “political.”

Advocacy officers always actively seek to differentiate their work from what they perceive as lobbying activity. But the same educational NGO employee who insisted on this distinction when I interviewed him, once I asked whether he had had training in lobbying, replied:

No, I had some training in parliamentary lobbying, but really . . . I don’t think there is any training for that in the French landscape, or rather, there is probably a little bit at Sciences Po or things like that, there must be some courses, but really it’s about industrial lobbying, if you see what I mean, it’s about how to put across your interests, but that’s still relatively illegal, lobbying I mean, yes, or in any case, it’s frowned upon. That’s what I mean, it’s frowned upon. As I see it, industrial lobbying is something that I think is often on the borderline of illegality, it’s somewhat tainted with bribery and stuff, or at least with information, disinformation, brainwashing, campaigns, etc. So I realize that there’s been a campaign, but it’s still defending special interests, so, it’s true, there’s more to it than that, but even so it’s the worst way. Or at least it’s perceived as the worst way of defending special interests. A lot of people offer training but it’s really, um . . . hidden training on the subject. It’s not the training it pretends to be, I mean any training at HEC or other schools prepares people to do lobbying. That’s a fact.45
What is interesting here is that, although he insists on these powerful moral distinctions, this interviewee is nevertheless trained in lobbying. The interview also clearly shows that the advocacy officer is familiar with the world of lobbying and realizes that the causes promoted by organizations affect their financing. It would be difficult for an NGO to raise funds without putting its cause on the agenda, as Charli Carpenter points out in citing an NGO member: "Without advocacy on an issue, you aren’t going to get funding on an issue."

For all that advocacy needs to be defended against appearing to be mere lobbying, the social and geographical areas in which these NGOs intervene are also the terrain for far more aggressive lobbying efforts by major corporations (on environmental and industrial issues or by pharmaceutical firms, for example). There are more than 15,000 lobbyists working in Brussels today. The majority of them represent economic and industrial interests, and a minority NGOs. But the geographical location of NGO advocacy offices reveals a strategy similar to that of lobbying firms, despite the critical stance adopted by NGOs toward those firms. For example, the “advocacy offices” of Oxfam, “focused on fighting the root causes of poverty at the international level,” are located in diverse global locations but always where key governmental and inter-governmental entities and agencies are headquartered, and thus alongside lobbying constituencies.

Within this tension, advocacy refers to a form of NGO speech that is experienced and viewed as noble, as opposed to lobbying and fundraising-oriented public relations. The term’s main advantage seems to lie in specifically designating the most worthy part of NGO discourse, which is also the one least directed toward public fundraising (lobbying) or private fundraising from individual donors. In short, it is perceived as the legitimate discourse of organizations as much as the legitimate discourse within organizations. But the tendency to ennoble lobbying by calling it advocacy is also found in large lobbying and public relations firms such as Hill and Knowlton, Weber and Shandwick, and Burson-Marsteller. Using the term “advocacy” would thus appear to dignify lobbying activity and give it a wider reach.

Explaining the Triumph of Advocacy

A conversion to the latest requirements of the industry of “development” and “civil society” is striking in my interview with an advocacy officer for the Coalition des alternatives africaines dette et développement (CAD Mali, or African Debt and Development Alternatives Coalition, one of the main NGO platforms in the country). When I asked him when he remembered first encountering the term “advocacy,” he replied,

When I was a consultant for the CAFO [Coordination des associations et ONG féminines du Mali, the main women’s organization in Mali], the term came up during a training program . . . It was necessary to train field agents to produce and use a logical framework as a planning tool. So at the time, I was working with a woman who was also a childhood friend and who is now the president of the CAFO, Traoré Oumou Touré, who told me “By the way, you know we also want to do advocacy,” and that was back in 1998, “we want to do advocacy first in
relation to reproductive health, and then we want to do advocacy to influence national policies, because we are a civil society organization and therefore the women’s wing itself of Malian civil society, so under those conditions we really want to influence national policies.”

It is quite meaningful that this person discovered advocacy as a new word in her professional environment, a word that comes along with the LFA and other techniques of the development world. It is not simply a word, however, but a thing that has to be done.

What brought about this massive conversion to advocacy? Did it stem solely from an awareness of the limitations of aid projects in previous decades? In my view, the rise of advocacy came about in reaction not only to the failures of the development industry but also to transformations in the sphere of international aid. It thereby contributed to a controlled form of criticism in its midst and to a paradoxical conformist trend among its actors, who nevertheless saw themselves as a critical spur to action on the part of public authorities. Whatever the reasons—justified in the eyes of NGOs—that led their members to support advocacy, the term was disseminated through the same channels as other key expressions used in development engineering: “strengthening capacities,” “capitalizing on experience,” and so forth.

The development of advocacy reflects both the criticism of international financial institutions and the way such criticism was taken into account by those same institutions. The most notable effect was the change in World Bank policy regarding NGOs: the Bank gave greater consideration to NGOs in response to criticism it received during the 1980s and 1990s and as a way of reaffirming its legitimacy. The reforms, which included increased NGO participation in determining and implementing the public policies supported by the Bank, resulted in its own acknowledgment of the advantages of NGO involvement in advocacy matters.

According to Lawrence F. Salmen and Paige Eaves, there were three advantages to NGO participation: “contributions to planning and design; watchdog or monitoring roles during implementation; and stimuli to corrective action. All three of these roles increased the projects’ responsiveness to the natural environment and to people unable to defend themselves (for example, impoverished groups threatened with resettlement as a result of a Bank-supported project).” The NGOs were not passive in this process. It marked a critical phase for some, particularly those closest to major infrastructural projects financed by the World Bank that were causing serious environmental damage (the Narmada Valley Dam in India was a typical case). The increased status and importance given to advocacy by leading international donors and international financial institutions was therefore ambiguous inasmuch as it was a reaction to criticism and an obvious attempt to nip it in the bud.

But the conversion to advocacy involved more than interaction between international donors and NGOs. It also ushered in a new era of “speaking out” on the part of NGOs, some of which—Oxfam in the United Kingdom, the Comité catholique contre la faim et pour le développement (CCFD) in France—had suffered the full force of backlash against Third-Worldism during the 1980s, led by the foundation Libertés sans frontières in France, linked to MSF. These organizations were criticized...
for taking a political stand on the issue of North-South inequalities to the point of absolving southern governments from any responsibility and excessively promoting Third World leftist organizations, even as they called upon the generosity of the northern public.\textsuperscript{53}

For these groups, the reference to advocacy, which apparently acquired greater legitimacy in the eyes of the authorities when it resembled a form of constructive dialogue and internal critique, made it possible once again to engage in politics, but in a more euphemistic way that might escape the earlier criticism to which they had been subjected. It is significant that Oxfam established its branch in France through an alliance with Agir ici pour un monde solidaire, an organization founded in 1988 by activists close to the Third-Worldist movement, which defended upstream intervention “with decisionmakers to try and influence their positions regarding the countries of the South” and proposed “a new mode of action directly involving citizens: opinion campaigns.”\textsuperscript{54}

The itinerary of an activist like Jean-Marie Fardeau offers a good example of this evolution. After helping to set up Agir ici, he became secretary general of the CCFD, where he argued in favor of more vocal intervention at the end of the 1980s when the opponents to Third-Worldism launched their counteroffensive. He became head of the Paris office of Human Rights Watch in 2007. At the time, NGO organizations, still traumatized by criticism for adopting positions too far to the left and too political, were reluctant to adopt the new method of speaking out. Fardeau remembers telling his colleagues at the CCFD, “You’ll end up doing it, too.”\textsuperscript{55}

Furthermore, the shift to advocacy has often been experienced as a way to re-enchant the development world following its failures. In Gilbert Rist’s view, when development organizations see their aims contradicted by reality, they tend to vaccinate themselves by cyclically proposing new aid paradigms (sustainable development, for example).\textsuperscript{56} Without necessarily being “in denial,” there is no doubt that promoting advocacy may look like a way for older organizations to avoid neglecting the root causes of the problems they cope with as NGOs in the field. The belief that they can do more than merely implement programs with uncertain outcomes gives them renewed enthusiasm for their action and the feeling that they are not abdicating in view of the inequalities their programs attempt to offset. This surely explains why adding advocacy to NGO development programs was experienced as progress and resulted in the desire to improve access to rights. (Consider, for example, training manuals for development workers engaged in teaching “communities” to use their rights.) It also promised to transform public policies in the South (in the “Education for All” campaign, for example). Finally, it suggested the novel possibility of affording effective monitoring of the use of new resources (citizen audits of national debt within the scope of the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries are a case in point).

Other factors have certainly contributed to the increasing value assigned to advocacy. One that has taken multiple forms is the development of a number of demands and topics that referred to law as a tool for international engineering, such as the rights-based approach in the development world or the “Responsibility to Protect” (R\textsuperscript{2}P), again in the 1990s and early 2000s.\textsuperscript{57} The case of R\textsuperscript{2}P is very telling. Though it was linked to American foreign policy issues and took the form of a
standard rather than a legal provision, the fact that it appealed to the responsibility of
governments gave advocacy a foothold in organizations seeking to denounce mass
atrocities by using the language of a norm that could become a right—including the
right to intervene. NGOs clearly perceived the combination of authorization and
constraint in R2P’s rise. It gave them an opportunity to weigh the pros and cons of
speaking out when it came to legitimizing, sometimes unintentionally, international
interventions or imperial enterprises.

Yet another aspect, this time a structural one, sheds light on why advocacy came
to be widely used as a legitimate way of speaking out in the world of international
NGOs. It involves the effects of professionalization on the international NGO sector,
and in particular a more pronounced division of labor and greater specialization. The
latter is visible both inside the organizations and among them.

Within the organizations, this division of labor and this specialization are always
likely to foster a process of disenchantment. They go hand in hand with the growing
presence of young graduates with advanced degrees in law, international relations, or
fields specifically related to humanitarian and human rights work, who claim to
possess skills specifically oriented toward the world of development and international
solidarity rather than strictly technical competence. Moreover, the tendency to send
fewer expatriates to the South (characteristic of Oxfam) has fueled reflection on the
proper positioning of organizations in the North and consequently has placed a
premium on speaking out rather than on setting up programs. The comparative
advantage of NGOs in the North, in addition to their financing, no doubt lies in their
proximity to the centers of “world governance” and global decision making.

But this division of labor has also become more pronounced among organizations.
The creation of operating platforms, increased coordination of development actors,
and the alignment of procedures used by the main international donors added further
pressure to adopt the latest mobilization technique—in this case, advocacy. Even large
international mobilization campaigns ended up becoming specialized, thereby encour-
aging the development of organizations exclusively specializing in advocacy.

Thus advocacy has suffered the fate of every form of development engineering: it
has become routinized and even reduced to issuing hollow directives like the adver-
tising calendar put out by the Réseau plaidoyer lobbying (RPL, the Advocacy and
Lobbying Network, an NGO based in Bamako, Mali), proudly displayed in a number
of administrative offices in Mali in 2009. The salaried members of the RPL aimed to
teach Malians how to engage in lobbying and advocacy. What was the cause? It hardly
mattered (advocacy seemed to have become an end in itself), but organization
members had clearly adopted all the verbal ticks of waffling commonly found in the
development world. RPL documents advocated “a strong, committed civil society”
and explained the reasons for a conversion to advocacy:

The new context of governance in Mali is characterized by a certain openness on
the part of the public authorities to the participation of civil society organizations
in various debates concerning national life. However, in most cases, this openness
is confronted with representatives of civil society organizations that are poorly
prepared or even totally unprepared to raise the level of the debates. As a result, it
has been difficult to take over many national, sub-regional, and regional initiatives, such as the Strategic Framework for Fighting Poverty and the New Partnership for African Development. Faced with this challenge, what kind of regional coordination was required? We decided to set up the Advocacy and Lobbying Network (RPL). An organization to strengthen capacities through training is exactly what the RPL became. Any new requirement in the development industry automatically led to expanded training offerings intended to implement the directives.

Advocacy as a Form of Mobilization

Given these various factors, advocacy seems to be caught in the dilemmas of organizations that have to maintain a minimum of neutrality (because they benefit from state funding or appeal to the generosity of the public) while fearing that they will be accused of pointlessness, guilty silence, or of being on the donors’ payroll.

Although advocacy is experienced individually as a way of fighting injustice, this paradoxical demand contributes to turning advocates into reasonable interlocutors—or forces them to remain coolheaded and sensible—who make positive assessments, or are required to do so, and seek to improve policies or programs in an environment where there is less and less room for criticism (MSF and Oxfam are exceptions in this respect). With their roles reduced, advocates incorporated in programs become merely legitimizing monitors. Programs are at best tweaked but no longer reoriented, since agreeing to monitor a program is already a way of justifying its existence.

The effectiveness of advocacy is furthermore an indication of the cleavages within the political groups being challenged, whether they are governments or international organizations. Jonathan Fox and David Brown have shown that NGO advocacy campaigns concerning the World Bank do not produce significant results, consume a considerable amount of energy, and are more likely to have an impact at the start of projects than once they are underway. Above all, the success of campaigns depends on how much they rely on divisions within the Bank and alliances with insider reformists. This conclusion bolsters Sidney Tarrow’s coral reef hypothesis: when NGOs (including advocacy NGOs) move into the political arena of international organizations with a view to changing some of their positions, they are also helping to consolidate them. Others are even more skeptical about how much influence advocacy NGOs actually have on the actors they engage. As the title of an article by Michael Edwards ironically puts it, does the doormat influence the boot?

The existence of the advocacy method of criticism also has effects on those who want to express their opposition differently. Actors who consider themselves more militant and radical, such as activists in the Committee for the Cancellation of Third World Debt (CADTM, a French-speaking NGO based in Belgium with networks in French-speaking Africa), have a genuine aversion to the term “advocacy”: “We do not see our NGO work as advocacy but as political challenge.” The price for head-on opposition is higher now, because international institutions can always refuse to deal with critical actors and choose instead those who also make suggestions and engage in dialogue, ruling out violence and ensuring that criticism remains internal.
Therefore, in most instances, promoting advocacy is one of a variety of ways of shaping the right kind of civil society, the one with which public authorities would clearly prefer to engage in dialogue, even if they have to create it themselves. Like all processes that mobilize expertise in public dialogue, the demand that dialogue assume the proper form, even when it is critical, dramatically increases the cost of speaking out for interest groups that are weak and lacking in financial and intellectual assets, the very assets that would authorize them to intervene in debates on finance, health, climate, and extractive resources. As Debra Minkoff has shown with regard to advocacy in women’s and minority associations in the United States, advocacy seems to have channeled and redirected the defense of some interests that otherwise would have remained associated either with service provision or with protest.65

**Conclusion: More Than A Word**

If advocacy were only a word, the way this word has traveled would confirm after all that the international circulation of ideas rarely takes place without functional misunderstandings that reflect the local circumstances through which ideas are perceived and imported.66 To be sure, the term “advocacy” has been tossed around, reworked, and transformed in many ways. One should not overlook the leeway given to actors in the NGO world, who are often highly critical of their powerful interlocutors, nor their capacity for lip service. One might be tempted to think it makes no difference which word is circulating around the world as long as the actors, who are clearly no fools, simply relabel their practices without changing their content (in this case, advocacy would merely be the latest word for what movements have always done under other names).

But it is clearly a little more than a word. Advocacy designates a form or a way of promoting causes and interests that almost inevitably disqualifies other ways of doing so. It is therefore not only a word but also a style and a professional sector that promotes legitimate practices and ways of thinking about them. It is no small paradox that, as a result, critical advocates end up reinforcing what they are contesting and do it all the more effectively, since they see themselves as its opponents. These complex relationships should not make us suspicious of everyone involved in advocacy, but they should persuade us not to give up using the theoretical tools of the sociology of interest groups in order to grasp what “civil society” and the repertoires of its mobilization owe to the powers that encourage these repertoires or accept them while shaping them.

This conclusion should by no means be interpreted as a new version of antipolitical, deradicalizing fatality often diagnosed in the world of development and human rights, among others.67 Nor is that diagnosis always wrong—but it must at least be specified on a case-by-case basis. In any event, it may help us understand how advocacy has achieved its influential outsider status, the prerequisite for its success, among more or less radical organizations in more or less repressive contexts. It gives an idea of the high cost of criticism, in terms of material resources, skills, expertise, self-control, and of playing by the rules of institutions at the ever-present risk of being swallowed up by them. When combined with the multiple effects of the international
division of political labor, the cost may even deepen the divide between the advocates who are fighting and the victims who are reduced to being mere witnesses of their own misfortune.

NOTES

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Siméant: Interpreting the Rise of International “Advocacy”

16. Ibid.


32. These tensions can also be found in the world of human rights, as demonstrated by the conception that was long prevalent at Amnesty International, which was embodied in a more Christian than legal conception of bearing witness. Stephen Hopgood, Keepers of the Flame: Understanding Amnesty International (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006). See also Michal Givoni, “Humanitarian Governance and Ethical Cultivation: Médecins sans frontières and the Advent of the Expert-Witness,” Millennium 40, no. 1 (2011): 40–63.


35. Thus some humanitarian workers think that bearing witness lies in taking action, to the point that they use the term “bearing witness” almost in a religious sense: it is the action that bears witness (to their convictions) more than their speech testifies to the suffering observed in the course of that action. This suppression of the object (the reality to which one bears witness) is also found in the use of “advocacy” without specifying to what it refers.


40. In the academic literature, this is what ends up excluding trade union work from being considered a moral movement or advocacy—even if it is conceded that in theory trade unionists could belong to that category, they are eliminated for the same reason as manufacturers, i.e.,
because they defend their “material interests”—and presupposes focusing on NGOs that defend “others.” See, for example, Keck and Sikkink, *Activists beyond Borders*.


49. Coates and David, “Learning for Change.”


52. Toward the end of the 1970s, a period already marked by the shift to an antitotalitarian stance within part of the French left, the foundation Libéré sans frontières, which took its inspiration from the Heritage Foundation, was set up by Claude Malhuret of MSF. Its members aimed to denounce dictatorships in southern countries, even when they were communist. In the process, they conducted a very violent campaign against development NGOs viewed as proponents of “Third-Worldism” and accused of culpable blindness toward regimes such as that of Mengistu in Ethiopia. In November 1985, Rony Brauman published an opinion piece titled “Contre le tiers-mondisme” in the daily newspaper *Le Monde*. The conference held by Libéré sans frontières, also in 1985, was titled “Le tiers-mondisme en question.” On French Third Worldism, see Eric Agrikoliansky, “Du Tiers-mondisme à l’altermondialisme: Genèse(s) d’une nouvelle cause,” in *L’altermondialisme en France: Histoire d’une nouvelle cause*, ed. Eric Agrikoliansky et al. (Paris: Flammarion, 2005), 46–73; Maxime Szczepanski-Huillery, “L’idéologie tiers-mondiste: Constructions et usages d’une catégorie intellectuelle en ‘crise,’” *Raisons politiques* 18, no. 2 (2003): 27–48.

53. These NGOs did not define themselves as Third-Worldist organizations, but it is true that they claimed to play a role in educating and raising the awareness of the public (cf. Oxfam’s “educated pound”) and were sometimes critical regarding North-South inequalities.

54. In 2003, Agir ici became a partner of the Oxfam international confederation as a “member observer.” In 2006, it became the French member of the Oxfam international confederation under...


58. Cf. this extract from the conclusions of an Oxfam Australia workshop: “R2P was seen to be both a benefit and a threat to NGOs’ advocacy efforts. It can be a benefit as it provides a framework of legal and moral internationally agreed obligations for States to act in the face of atrocity crimes. This is helpful when advocating with States and other stakeholders to act for the benefit of vulnerable populations. On the other hand, the highly political nature of R2P, and its perceived alignment with an ultimate use of force, means that applying the language of R2P can be offensive to States whose populations are at risk of atrocity crimes. This in turn politicizes any advocacy efforts to the point where NGO staff and operations may be threatened.” See Responsibility to Protect website, accessed July 12, 2011, http://www.responsibilitytoprotect.org/index.php/component/content/article/172-asia-pacific/2739-oxfam-australia-outcome-document-of-november-2009-r2p-workshop-on-ngos-and-the-prevention-of-mass-atrocity-crimes.


60. ICCO and BBO are Dutch organizations. Quotation from Réseau plaidoyer et lobbying, informational document, 2009.


62. Josh Busby also emphasizes the role of national gatekeepers in the success of international advocacy campaigns. Busby, Moral Movements and Foreign Policy.

63. Tarrow, “Transnational Politics.”


65. Minkoff, “From Service Provision to Institutional Advocacy.”
