

IC Bangladesh Case Study 3

Advocacy and Campaigning by the National Dalit Movement in Bangladesh (2008-2011)

Description of the practice:

What was/is the background to the practice? Describe any key events or actions that led to it?

See case study 1 which focusses on BDERM movement/internal structure. This case outlines strategies that BDERM have taken in relation to external advocacy and campaigning.

What was/is the title/name of the practice?

Advocacy and Campaigning by the National Dalit Movement in Bangladesh (2008-2011)

What was/is the aim/purpose of the practice?

To raise awareness, and to lobby and campaign against caste discrimination in Bangladesh. Specifically:

- To build public awareness against discrimination based on work and descent.
- To make policy makers (both government and non-government) sensitive and responsible to meeting the rights and needs of Dalit and excluded communities.

What was/is the target group(s)?

Targets - Government Ministries, MPs, key donors, media, general public, NGOs and academia. (International – HR Council, EU and influential member states).

Who were/are the partners involved (e.g. community based, NGO-based, government institutions, and other related stakeholders)?

Community based Dalit organisations
NGOs - Nagorik Uddyog, IDSN and One World Action

What was/is the duration of practice?

Ongoing

Legal and institutional frameworks:

BDERM uses language and arguments enshrined in national and international human rights conventions and legislation to inform its advocacy and purpose. It has particularly used CEDAW, UPR and draft P&G processes.

Implementation of the practice:

BDERM has undertaken both reactive and proactive campaigning, using a range of different strategies. These include:

- **Human chains** - where people stand by the side of the road with festoons and photographs - have been used to raise visibility and gain media coverage. Human chains have been used to call for specific demands (e.g. for inclusion in election manifestos) and to protest against atrocities.
- **Marking International Days** - Events, rallies, human chains and awareness raising events have been held across the country to mark International Human Rights Day, World Dignity Day, International Women's Day, Day for the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, National Victory Day and International Mother Tongue Day. For example in December 2010 events were held in 29 districts – calling for specific action to be taken to end discrimination; to introduce a specific law on caste discrimination; to establish a special desk for Dalit women within the Ministry for Women and Children; to improve education, social security benefits, health care, access to land for Dalits and excluded communities; and to implement a quota system for education, employment and political parties.

- **Seminars for Policy Makers and Practitioners** - to put pressure on the Government to adopt specific policies. These have been mainly held in Dhaka at the National Press Club and featured high profile politicians, activists and academics.
- **Media Coverage** - BDERM have gained widespread media coverage and have built strong relationships with supportive journalists, who are now key allies of the movement. Numerous press conferences have been held to highlight events, contribute to lobbying and to raise awareness about specific human rights violations. Successful and supportive media coverage, *print, TV, radio, new media*, has played a major role in the growing visibility of this issue.
- **Legal Assistance, Fact Finding and Securing Justice** - BDERM have developed the mechanisms and skills to respond when incidents of abuse, violence or discrimination occur. Members now regularly conduct fact finding, lodge complaints and accompany cases through to the court. For example a press conference was organised to demand legal action and the arrest of perpetrators, in 3 separate incidents of murder in Jessore and Jhenaidah Districts.
- **Documentation and Research** - BDERM have researched, produced and commissioned a range of newsletters, publications, reports and documents. These have been produced in both English and Bangla.
- **Celebrating Dalit Culture and Contribution** - BDERM have co-ordinated a range of cultural and musical programmes to celebrate the contribution of Dalit culture to music, theatre and the arts in Bangladesh. For example an event in December 2010 in Dhaka featured traditional songs sung by Dalit women. A drama show, called *Amra Dalit (We are Dalit)* has been shown in Dhaka and in communities, performed alongside a photographic exhibition.

International Advocacy and Awareness Raising

- BDERM now regularly participate in IDSN Council meetings and lobbying - so jointly influencing the UN Human Rights Council and the European Union. BDERM have also participated in the Universal Periodic Review Forum, submitting an alternative report. BDERM also participated in the Durban Review Conference and have held a series of meetings with the Bangladesh delegation in Geneva.
- BDERM have hosted various delegations from Dalit organisations in India and Nepal to share strategies and to observe and compare the situation of Dalits in Bangladesh.
- BDERM co-ordinated two UK journalists, from The Guardian and Independent to visit Dalit colonies and as a result articles were featured in the popular UK press.
- BDERM participated in the 'Decade of Dalit Rights at UN' with the titled "Tear Down the Barriers of Caste" conference in Geneva, in June 2011. BDERM was a co-organiser of this conference with 22 national and international Dalit and human rights organisations.

Describe the successes and challenges to implementing the practice, if needed with inspiration from the following guiding questions:

- *How was this practice innovative?*

Answer:

○ **Lobbying and Advocacy Successes**

The Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina recently issued a message to mark the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. She stated that as a signatory of the Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and member of the UN Human Rights Council, Bangladesh is working incessantly to eliminate caste and all forms of discrimination. The Social Welfare Minister has made initial positive statements in relation to the introduction of quotas within education and employment. Law Minister Barrister Shafiq Ahmed recently pronounced during a seminar that an anti-discrimination law should be formulated. Other highlights include:

- The inclusion of Dalit concerns within the **election manifestos of all eight major political parties**.
- Influencing the national **Poverty Reduction Strategic Paper** and the **National Human Rights Commission** to seriously address Dalits and excluded communities.
- **Lobbying for Constitutional change**. BDERM submitted a memorandum to the special parliamentary committee to amend the constitution on October 5th 2010, demanding special provision in the constitution to protect the Dalit

community and make more explicit reference to caste based discrimination. Copies were sent to all 340 MPs. BDERM had a positive meeting with the Co-chairman of the Constitution Review Committee.

- **Positive meetings have been held with various MPs** (e.g. *Shuranjit Sen Gupta*) and **Ministries** held to request quotas, a specific law against untouchability and more priority to be given to the issue. In January 2011 BDERM leaders met with the Prime Minister, her sister Sheikh Rehana and her niece Tulip at her Government home. They discussed the overall situation and some solutions to the current problems – including the need to include caste within the national census. She assured representatives of her Government’s commitment to improve the situation of Dalit and excluded communities based on the electoral manifesto of the ruling alliance.
- **BDERM have held a series of meeting with the Danish, UK and German Embassies, and with the European Commission and United Nations Development Programme** to make recommendations for how Dalits and excluded communities can be included within wider development programmes. In October 2011, the UK Department for International Development (DFID) invited BDERM representatives to participate in a workshop on social exclusion.

Conditions for Success (overlaps with Case 1)

- **Relative quick campaigning successes early on** (e.g. election manifestos, media coverage) has given BDERM credibility and given members encouragement, bringing in new activists and organisations.
- **Receptive target audiences** – although caste discrimination is still denied by some there has been tentative recognition from the government, donors, and civil society that there are Dalits and excluded communities who face discrimination and poverty in Bangladesh. However symbolic, at the highest levels BDERM have usually had an encouraging and positive reception (very different from India). Bangladesh cares how it is viewed internationally – the government has quickly changed its position from denial to engagement and has on a superficial level made encouraging signs of progress which BDERM have been quick to monopolise on (this momentum needs to be sustained to convert pledges into action).

- Identify three key recommendations for similar practices/initiatives that can be replicated in the future. How could the process have been improved and sustained?

BDERM has an integrated approach combining mobilisation, grassroots organising/empowerment, lobbying, awareness raising, campaigning, education and working with the media. Through this combination of tactics BDERM have dramatically developed their movement, raised the visibility of these issues and lobbied for some initial but importantly symbolic action from the government and donors. Agencies such as the International Dalit Solidarity Network and One World Action have drawn international attention to the existence of Dalits in Bangladesh through lobbying the UN, EU, international donors and through wider advocacy and awareness raising.

Recommendations and observations:

- Combine achievable short term ‘easy wins’ with longer term advocacy for wider social change.
- Combination of high level lobbying with popular campaigning to illustrate public concern on these issues has worked well.
- Clear top level messages with the flexibility to take on individual/localised issues.
- Visual and accessible campaigns – human chains, posters, theatre shows etc.
- Vital to nourish and develop relationship with influential allies.
- Follow up is essential and has not always been sustained – difficult to work on so many issues simultaneously and to lobby so many targets.
- Targeted lobbying is key – for example develop specific messages for different ministries.
- In every meeting or interaction prepare a list of things that people can do now that links with short, medium and long term goals. Give people that want to help practical things they can do easily.
- Humanise the issue – using testimonies, photos and personal visits has worked well.
- Take a critical but constructive approach to advocacy – don’t alienate potential allies.
- Although the 2011 Census provided an unprecedented opportunity to capture national data, categories related to work, descent and caste were not included and lobbying on this was not successful.
- Active engagement with the Universal Periodic Review Forum was very useful as a lobbying tool to mainstream the Dalit issues within national human rights landscape.
- BDERM have invested a great deal of time participating in events held by human rights and development organisations to both bring Dalit issues into the mainstream and to make these issues visible to new and

potentially supportive audiences and allies. For example three Dalit students participated in the recent National Youth Parliament.

Publicity:

Can IDSN use this case publicly, e.g. on an open conference website or in a conference report? Yes