



Checklist for Choosing an Issue

Overview: Through problem analysis, groups identify a variety of causes of a problem that can potentially be solved through political action. These are called “issues”, which is used as an easy description of the specific aspects of a problem that action and advocacy addresses. For example, the problem of gender violence needs to be broken down into narrower pieces such as domestic violence, workplace harassment, rape, etc. so we can focus our solutions.

Purpose: Choosing an issue is one of the most difficult tasks. This activity helps a group define criteria for choosing an issue and use it to assess and explore strategic options. An organization should choose an issue that best furthers their values, credibility, opportunities and vision and results in impact on the problem.

Time: 2-3 hours

Materials:

- Copies of the Criteria for Ranking Issues
- Copies of the Checklist
- Flipchart
- Markers
- Tape

Credit: [A New Weave of Power, People and Politics](#), adapted from Organizing for Social Change, Midwest Academy.



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Process:

Facilitator Note: Prepare a flip chart version of the checklist ahead of time which you can work with as a group as you hone your criteria. The group should be coming in with 2 or 3 issues it is considering work on, and among which it needs to choose.

1. Discuss and adapt the criteria on the checklist to suit your context. Make sure that everyone in the group has the same understanding of each criterion. Take one criterion at a time, discuss its meaning for the group, and decide whether it's important. At the end, distribute the definitions below as a handout and make the changes that the group has agreed upon.
2. Make sure that all participants understand the issues you are comparing. Quickly review your existing analysis (e.g. Power Tree Analysis) before applying the checklist. In most cases, the criteria dealing with how the strategy is carried out may be premature at this planning stage.
3. Using the chart (attached) go through each of the criteria for each issue you are considering. Make an X if the issue fits the criteria.
4. After making X's for each issue, see which issue has the most X's. Rank your issues #1, #2 or #3 based on how well they meet the criteria, #1 being the highest ranking.

*Facilitator Note: This is a key moment to discuss what has emerged. You may discover that you want to weight certain criteria more than others, or that another criterion needs consideration. The results may require more research or analysis before a choice is made. Useful resource at this point attached: **Factors to Consider in Shaping a Strategy and What Good Strategies Should Be.***



Criteria for Ranking Issues

The solution of an issue should:

- **Result in real improvement in people's lives.** Some of the important changes that advocacy achieves may not be clearly visible. Seeing and feeling a concrete change is usually the best motivation for people to continue to participate politically. Visible changes also give an advocacy organization credibility for future action. A real improvement in people's day-to-day lives is a sign of citizen victory. Examples include better housing, a women's police station to handle domestic disputes, additional teachers and books for schools, more and better paying jobs and the establishment of parent-teacher councils to oversee budgetary decisions on local schools. Examples of changes that are not immediately visible in people's lives include constitutional reform, a new NGO law and more awareness about discrimination. For less visible changes, you will need media strategies to explain how these changes can make a real difference.
- **Give people a sense of their own power.** Will the solution involve ordinary people, particularly those affected by the problem, in the advocacy effort? People need to know that they are key to the organizing effort – that it is not just experts or NGO staff running the show. Giving people a sense of their own power demands careful constituency-building through participatory planning and analysis, town meetings, rallies, letter writing, lobbying, consciousness-raising, etc.
- **Be widely felt.** The numbers of people who care or are hurt by an issue is a good justification for choosing it. Numbers affected will be an important source of power for your strategy. Politicians and decision-makers can more easily dismiss an issue when it is only felt by a small number of people.
- **Be deeply felt.** To get involved, people must feel strongly about the need for a solution. Anger, frustration and other emotions are motivators for action.
- **Build lasting organization and alliances.** The issue should lend itself to networking and organization-building. It should present opportunities to strengthen citizens' groups and build linkages across groups, creating a basis for future action.
- **Create opportunities for women and marginalized people to get involved in politics.** A "good" issue presents opportunities for people with less public and political exposure and access to decision-making to practice citizenship and leadership.



- **Develop new leaders.** An issue that provides opportunities for new leaders to emerge as spokespeople, coordinators, and planners builds citizen participation. Technical and complicated issues often do not lend themselves easily to the development of new leaders.
- **Promote awareness of and respect for rights.** Is the issue already understood as a right? Can advocacy expand what is understood as a right? Much social justice advocacy is about gaining acceptance that inclusion and fairness are fundamental to human dignity. It is about the right of every person to have a voice in the decisions affecting them, to equal access to education and to job opportunities, etc. These rights are not always recognized and may be difficult to enforce. Some people may not know certain rights exist.
- **Have a clear political and policy solution.** If the best way to address an issue is through service delivery – such as an emergency where people need food and water above all – it is usually not a good advocacy issue. Similarly, if consciousness-raising is the best way to address your issue, it is not a good choice. The solution to your issue must have a clear link with policy and with public or economic decision-making.
- **Have a clear target and timeframe.** An advocacy target is the pivotal decision maker who can respond to your demands. Personalizing decision-making helps make an abstract “system” seem more accessible to change by ordinary people. Also, if you are working with people who are newly active, a definite timeframe helps, as do benchmarks that allow people to celebrate small steps of progress. (See Chapter 15 for more discussion of targets.)
- **Link local concern to global issues.** “Politics are local,” but increasingly many causes and solutions to issues involve global decisions. These include, for example, factories moving from place to place which cause unemployment, and international development and trade policy. Linking local concerns to global organizing can be politically powerful, but can also be challenging for organizers to manage multi-level coordination and communication.
- **Provide opportunities to raise funds.** You cannot do much without money. Funds can come from international donors as well as from local supporters. Local support is important because international funding can sometimes discredit local political organizing. If your issue provides opportunities to get money from local people, industry or others, it shows that there is local support.



- **Enable you to further your vision and mission.** You should not take up an issue that takes you outside your scope of work and your basic values. Advocacy efforts strain organizations, so it is especially important that it contribute to its mission and vision. It is easy to be wooed by an exciting issue and available funds.
- **Be winnable/provide clear gains.** Success is the best motivation for sustaining citizen participation. Failure can be discouraging to people. But victory should not be defined only in terms of policy gains. Advocacy, whether successful in the realm of policy or not, can succeed in building organizations and mobilizing public opinion. Make sure that victories are broadly defined and set in modest, step-by-step terms. Then people can celebrate their achievements along the way.



CHECKLIST FOR CHOOSING AN ISSUE

Criteria	Issue #1	Issue #2	Issue #3
Result in a real improvement in people's lives			
Give people a sense of their own power			
Be widely felt			
Be deeply felt			
Build lasting organization and alliances			
Create opportunities for women and marginalized people to get involved in politics			
Develop new leaders			
Promote awareness of and respect for rights			
Have a clear political and policy solution			
Have a clear target and timeframe			
Link local concerns to global issues			
Provide opportunities to raise funds			
Enable you to further our vision and mission			
Be winnable			



Factors to Consider in Shaping a Strategy

There are some key factors that shape your advocacy and organizing strategy. They differ from one place to another, as well as from one issue to another:

- **Context:** Every political environment is different. Each presents its own opportunities and constraints. Governments have different degrees of legitimacy and power vis a vis civil society, the private sector, transnationals and international institutions. Political decisions are made differently depending on the nature of the state, politics, media, etc. In some places, the legislature has more authority. In other places, the Minister of Finance dominates policymaking. Countries have different levels of freedom and access to the public sector. People use these opportunities differently depending on literacy, poverty, social relationships, etc. A society's mix of culture, religion, ethnicity, race, and economic development affects the level of tolerance and openings to social change. In some countries, advocacy at the local or the international level may be more feasible than at the national level.
- **Timing and Opportunity:** Each historic moment presents different political opportunities and constraints. International economic trends may make a country tighten or expand political space. Elections or international conferences may provide opportunities to raise controversial issues. At some moments, a march will draw attention to an issue. At other moments a march may provoke repression.
- **Organization:** In designing your strategy, it is important to be aware of the strengths and weaknesses of your organization. How broad and strong is your potential support? Do you have well-placed allies? Is there a strong sense of common purpose among the leadership? Is the decision making efficient and responsive? What resources can you rely on? Are your aims clear and achievable?
- **Risk:** Not all advocacy strategies can be used universally. In some places, a direct action aimed at a key decision-maker may be politically dangerous, or may lessen the potential for a long-term effort at change. In some countries, pushing for change that affects cultural beliefs may provoke an unmanageable backlash. Sometimes involving people who are usually excluded, like women or poor people, may cause family, social and community conflict. Challenging relations of power tends to generate conflict and organizers must have ways of dealing with this. In more closed environments, advocacy often takes the form of community action around basic needs and is not publicly referred to as political advocacy. Whatever the context, sometimes you will decide to take risks because there are no other options. In these cases, everyone involved must understand the implications of those risks.



What Good Strategies Should Be

Appropriate

- Will the strategy further your group's vision and mission?
- Will it make good use of your organization's strengths?
- Will it fit the community conditions where your group operates?
- Will your constituency be able to participate?
- Will it exacerbate or reduce social tensions within the community?

Adequate

- Will the strategy be sufficient to address the problem given its magnitude?
- Does the problem justify the effort and resources you will expend?

Effective

- Will the strategy achieve the stated objective?
- Will the strategy further your missions *and* address the problem in a reasonable timeframe?

Efficient

- Will the strategy make optimum use of the organization's material and human resources?
- What are the strategy's costs in terms of people's time, energy, and materials in relation to benefits?

Sensitive to side effects

- Will the strategy increase demand for basic services or resources?
- Will the strategy generate resistance due to traditions, religion, etc.?
- How can this resistance be minimized?
- How will those in power respond to shifts in social relationships, demands for change, etc.?
- What will happen if violence breaks out?
- Will the negative consequences be counterbalanced by the positive benefits?