

## 2 What is advocacy?

There are many ways to define advocacy. A very simple definition is: **speaking on behalf of another**. A more sophisticated definition describes advocacy as: **a set of organized actions aimed at influencing and/or changing the behaviours, policies, and resource allocation of individuals or institutions that hold power, for the betterment of people affected by an issue.**<sup>1</sup>

However you define it, advocacy has to do with influencing people, structures, and systems to bring about change. Very often, advocacy involves speaking to government, either at a municipal, provincial or federal level. This is how MCC generally understands and practices advocacy. But advocacy can also be aimed at shifting the attitudes, policies and practices of churches, schools, corporations or society as a whole.

Advocacy is about unmasking the structural and systemic causes of poverty, violence, injustice and human indignity, and seeking to address them. It often emerges out of deep relationships with those who suffer injustice, and a commitment to amplifying their voice. For MCC, advocacy is rooted in the biblical call to seek justice for the oppressed.

This focus on addressing systemic or root causes can help us distinguish advocacy from other forms of assistance. For example, you are doing direct service, if you:

- Sew blankets or assemble [relief kits](#) for MCC;
- Participate in an MCC community project such as prison visitation;
- Volunteer in a soup kitchen or food bank.

But you are engaged if advocacy if you:

- Meet with your MP to urge increased foreign aid or justice for Indigenous peoples;
- Sign a petition to call for a ban on the manufacture and use of cluster munitions;
- Organize a public peace witness to lament the horrors of war and call for nonviolent responses to conflict.



“  
Give a person a fish  
and you feed her for  
a day. Teach a person  
to fish and you feed  
him for a lifetime.  
Ensure that everyone  
who wants to fish has  
access to the pond  
and all will be fed.

<sup>1</sup>MCC Latin American Caribbean Framework for Advocacy, 2014, p. 1.

At the MCC Ottawa Office, we see advocacy as a tool for furthering our work of humanitarian assistance, community development and peacebuilding. We use advocacy to address government policies and practices that harm people, and we offer proposals for change that can lessen suffering, foster empowerment, and promote justice and human dignity. We also use advocacy to affirm things the government is doing and to contribute positively to policies we would like to see expanded.

We see advocacy as being a two-sided coin:

- Political engagement—This is the direct engagement we do with parliamentarians and civil servants through personal meetings, written letters, submissions to committees, etc.
- Public engagement—This is the work we do among our constituents and supporters to build awareness about particular issues and to encourage them to engage in advocacy.

Advocacy takes many forms. It can be as simple as writing a letter to your member of Parliament in the privacy of your home. Or it can be as complex as a highly organized campaign involving many people, numerous special events, a sophisticated media strategy, and a range of actions carried out over a sustained period of time. It may include nonviolent direct action and even civil disobedience.

If you need to be convinced why advocacy is important, go to Section 6. If you are already convinced you want to become engaged, simply read on.

“ We are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice, we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself.

*Dietrich Bonhoeffer*

## story

**FOR OVER A DECADE**, people in many parts of the world have been raising their voice about the practices of Canadian mining companies operating in their communities. They point to human rights violations, environmental destruction, social and economic upheaval, and disregard for the wishes of local communities. Faith-based and civil society groups have been advocating for accountability for mining companies, which frequently operate with impunity. In 2014 the federal government, which had been resisting anything but weak and voluntary mechanisms, finally took steps to implement mandatory reporting for Canadian mining companies. From now on, mining companies would be required to report publicly any payments made to host governments for mining concessions. The story is far from over, but it does demonstrate that the concerted effort of Canadians from many sectors of society has achieved a measure of accountability that has not existed before.

