

Chapter 3. Advocacy for a Sustainable Future

One aim of VISION centres around developing new dialogue-building and exploration tools for advocacy, tools which foster shared values, participation, and inclusion to empower social work professionals as agents of sustainable urban change (URGE, 2023). In his book *Building and Dwelling: Ethics for the City*, urbanist Richard Sennett (2018, p. 268) discusses the climate crisis and asks: ‘*Can the city build its way out of such crises?*’. The answer is complex. But, in light of the three pillars of sustainability, according to Purvis et al. (2018), ‘building’ in more sustainable ways both environmentally and economically speaking, must be supplemented by cooperation and conversations resulting in solutions which include social dimensions as well. Yet, conversation and decision-making in urban development is often polarised and conflict-ridden, whereby multiple disparate perspectives, interests, and power positions collide. Dialogue takes place under pressure, in part due to the fast-paced life that has led to deficient ethical articulations of societal developments (Rosa, 2010). Research demonstrates that having a voice in such processes of change is a major part of creating social sustainability (Brennan et al., 2017; Checker, 2011). Therefore, the tools within VISION have also been developed to strengthen social workers’ ability to advocate on behalf of and with vulnerable urban populations, ensuring that they have a voice in urban planning processes. To do so, a basic knowledge about advocacy in social work is needed. In this chapter, we present an overview of the method from a sustainability perspective, closing with an overview of how VISION can be used for advocacy purposes.

Speaking to power

Inspired by eco-social work, collective methods such as community work, group work, and advocacy are valuable to the profession, moving its practice towards a focus on sustainability (Boetto, 2019). As Professor Liz Beddoe (2024) puts it, the struggle for change and the achievement of just societies is hard, and calls for greater activism, spanning national and regional boundaries, building strength through relationships and solidarity. As early as 2013, Beddoe and Professor Phillip R. J. Harington (2013) argued that civics practices should be the new professional paradigm for social work. They suggested that social workers—especially during times of change—must be able to communicate on several levels, both informally within practice and in everyday situations with service users and co-workers (Harington & Beddoe, 2013). Furthermore, they must also develop an ability to communicate in more formal and scientific ways, which they refer to as *speaking to power* (Harington & Beddoe, 2013). In other words, they must be both the optimal case workers and agents who gather knowledge and communicate it further. They argued for professionals who would not only focus on ‘what works’, the primary regime in the years of new public management, but also on what does not work—and saying so out loud.

Currently, the need for advocacy and a strong value base have become increasingly acute as we face crises at the local, national, regional, and global levels (Beddoe, 2024). Whilst speaking from the viewpoint of a social work educator, her points apply to practitioners as well:

We face challenges from many directions. Our governments want us to prepare functionaries equipped to make social problems go away, without addressing structural factors. Our statutory employing organizations want graduates ready for practice, shelf-stable, resilient, and not likely to rock the boat. The community sector wants us to show leadership in holding the line against the roll-back of progressive, redistributive policies and programmes. Our universities are cutting

courses and decimating departments in the social sciences. In many countries, we face the rise of populism, which is serving to legitimise racism, misogyny, and bigotry. This is not a time for social work in the academy to be quiet. (Beddoe, 2024, p. 2833)

Language and value development

So, what can social workers do to become more capable in speaking to power? This question, amongst others, inspired the URGE project, which in part took inspiration from research completed in another Erasmus+ project, Urban SOS (Rauhala et al., 2022). We understood from our collaboration with our practice partners that most social workers find that the knowledge gained through their everyday interactions with vulnerable populations in urban social work is rarely used to qualify discussions of and decisions about sustainable urban development and design.

As Beddoe and Harington (2013) argued, during times of change it becomes increasingly important for practitioners to successfully vouch for their work—that is, to live up to what they call ‘*veracity*’, being truthful to yourself and in what you believe. To attune social work to the challenges it faces, different approaches are therefore needed. As such, practitioners should engage in practice-based research to broaden their understanding whilst adopting language that resonates with decision-makers. They must inform policy through practice, which requires advocacy, community engagement, fundraising, and project management skills to strengthen the profession (Boetto, 2019; Harington & Beddoe, 2013). In line with VISION, this work must rest upon strong values at both the individual and professional levels.

Advocacy in social work

When learning to speak truth to power, an overview of the history and different levels of advocacy offers a solid starting point. Advocacy has a quite long tradition in social work, extending back to Jane Addams and Paulo Freire, both pioneers of the profession who acted upon critical thought in favour of more just communities. For Addams (1902), social workers should play the role of co-builders of those just societies, by strengthening collectiveness and social bonds. To her mind, individuals standing together and helping each other are less likely to fall victim to the exploitative mechanisms of early industrialisation. For Freire (1973), the primary motivation behind his important pedagogical work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, centred around analysing how power structures always favour some individuals over others, leaving the latter with few options to change their situation. They were often deprived of the knowledge, language, and resources to change things by themselves, whilst those already holding power had little motivation to alter the status quo. In a social work inspired by Freire, the role then focuses on spreading knowledge and building resources towards resisting. Freire believed that oppression lives in the hearts and minds of the oppressed; to combat this, conscientisation—the process of becoming aware of oneself in one’s own world—represents the first step towards liberation. Other theorists and practitioners have inspired social work advocacy as well, but Freire and Addams serve as founders of the community-based tradition of achieving social work’s goals of social justice, equality, and the promotion of human dignity as spelled out in IFSW’s (2018) statement of principles for ethical social work practice. This leads to our definition of advocacy in VISION: the act of promoting and supporting the rights to equity, inclusion, accessibility, and wellbeing of individuals, groups, or communities.

Social workers, grounded in Freire's ideas, work from the position that people are capable, knowledgeable, and continuously growing. They are trustworthy and their behaviour is purposeful. Freire believed that the right to self-determination was a foundational principle on the road to conscientisation. When social workers interact with people in precarious situations, it is necessary to understand their context and respect their knowledge whilst supporting their expanding ability to act on things about which they feel strongly. As catalysts, social workers act to stimulate the self-awareness of those with whom they work through critical dialogue and support for collective transformation (Christian & Jhala, 2015).

Advocacy at different levels: Cause and case advocacy

More broadly, advocacy can be understood in multiple ways. Practiced in multiple professions and contexts, advocacy in social work often distinguishes between *cause* and *case* advocacy (Scourfield, 2021; Guy, 2004).

Cause advocacy is understood as a form of social action aimed at influencing public policy and social change in favour of a specific cause or issue. Differing from service delivery, cause advocacy focuses on providing direct assistance to individuals or groups in need, taking various forms, such as lobbying, campaigning, protesting, petitioning, educating, or mobilising. Cause advocacy can also involve various actors, such as individuals, organisations, coalitions, movements, or networks (TearFund Learn, 2022). The process proceeds as follows:

- Identify the cause (i.e., environmental conservation, human rights, education reform, or sustainable cities).
- Build the case (i.e., gather relevant data, research, and evidence to understand the root causes and impacts).
- Mobilise support (i.e., individuals, communities, organisations, and policymakers through grassroots campaigns, social media activism, community organising, and strategic partnerships).
- Influence public opinion (i.e., writing op-eds, organising public events, leveraging social media platforms, and/or engaging with traditional media outlets).
- Engage with decision-makers.
- Create lasting change.

By contrast, *case advocacy* focuses on pleading the case of an injustice and recommending changes to laws and legislation to meet the needs of specific groups. Case advocacy pleads on behalf of the individual, family, or small group and first involves collaborating with a client, then going with them to the site of the injustice and assisting them as they navigate other systems of redress.

The micro-, meso-, and macro-levels

Another way of differentiating advocacy practices lies in viewing it in relation to the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels of social work practice. The micro–meso–macro framework of advocacy is rooted in ecological systems theory and has been further developed within social work scholarship, notably in Jansson's (2019, pp. 10–11) multilevel model of policy and practice advocacy. Figure 1 below illustrates these levels.

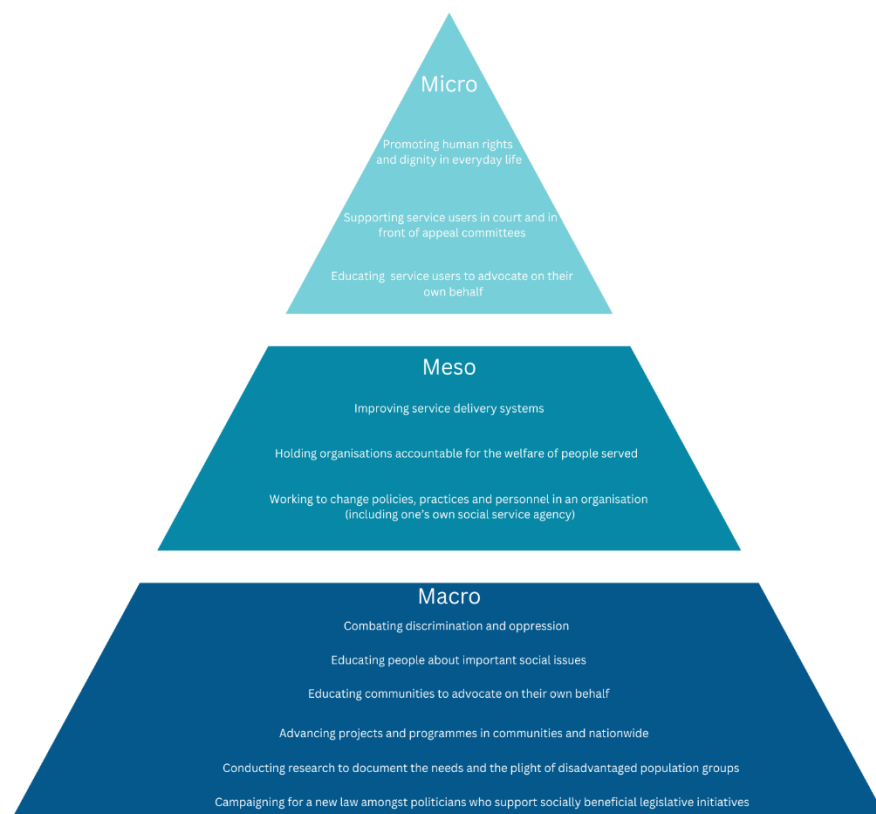


Figure 1. Advocacy at the micro-, meso-, macro-levels. Image credit: Leigh Anne Rauhala, adapted from Jansson's (2019, pp. 6–9) multilevel model of policy and practice advocacy.

First, macro-level advocacy reflects social workers involvement in the policy and governmental systems that play a larger role in the lives of entire communities and regions, often referred to as cause advocacy. For example, social workers at this level may work in policy advocacy, research, and administrative roles. At the meso-level, social workers advocate for and with communities, schools, teams, or organisations. Their day-to-day work involves less one-on-one communication than at the micro-level, but still includes work on the personal level. This also includes advocacy at the organisational level. Finally, in micro-level social work, advocacy focuses on the small units or systems which reflect social workers' primary focus within a welfare system. At this level, social workers interact directly with their clients in rather small groups or one-on-one. This is the most intimate level of social work and is often referred to as case advocacy.

Using the power cube to map power

One concrete way to plan an advocacy approach relies on mapping power relations surrounding a specific topic. According to the Campaign Bootcamp and the University of Sussex (n.d.), power mapping offers a highly useful way to construct an advocacy campaign. Schutz (in Gaventa, 2019) further argues that, within the human and social services, we often narrowly focus on individual users without considering collective and systemic challenges. The power cube (see Figure 2), developed by Gaventa (2019), can serve as a tool to support social workers to think more critically and direct their advocacy efforts in the right direction. The power cube can also be used to help

identify and create spaces where service users, professionals, and policymakers can reflect on their values together.

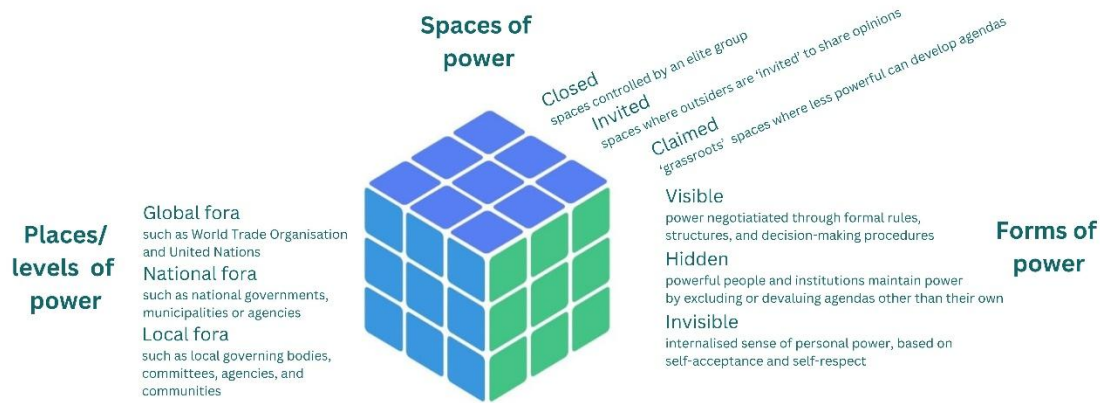


Figure 2. The power cube framework. Image credit: Leigh Anne Rauhala, adapted from Gaventa (1997), cited in Luttrell et al. (2009; see also Rowlands, 1997).

To illustrate the application of the power cube, we use the example of immigration.

In *places* of power, multiple layers of authority operate within a global context. These levels interact in complex ways, such as follows:

- At the *global level*, which might include international refugee conventions, global immigration trends, or EU border policies and restrictions.
- At the *national level* through national immigration laws and asylum procedures or policies related to integration benefits including language courses or living subsidies.
- At the *local level* through access to municipal housing or school integration policies.

Spaces of power consist of areas controlled by elite groups, such as managers or members of parliament. These spaces are often private, hidden behind closed doors with opaque means of communication to those not considered members of the group. In the context of immigration, this might include:

- *Closed spaces* such as parliamentary committees in which immigration policies are decided. These usually comprise small groups of people who make decisions amongst themselves and then communicate decisions once they are made.
- *Invited spaces* such as parliamentary consultations with experts, nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), or limited participation amongst migrants. These might involve invitations to share lived experiences related to a topic under discussion or a policy debate. In these settings, a diversity of people may participate in decision-making, although their input and visibility are not necessarily guaranteed in final decisions.
- *Claimed or created spaces* such as immigrant-led advocacy groups, social media campaigns, or grassroots movements. These consist of spaces where traditionally marginalised groups

come together to create a space to try and make the changes they feel are important or necessary.

Forms of power refer to how individuals, organisations, or governments exercise their authority. In relation to immigration, examples of exercised power include:

- *Visible power* or structural forms of power such as immigration laws, asylum policies, and social benefits regulations.
- *Hidden power* such as policymakers or lobbying groups attempting to influence agendas, how the media frames immigration, or general barriers to participation (i.e., language accessibility or childcare availability), limiting the ability of specific individuals or groups to take part in society.
- *Invisible power* in the form of cultural norms and stereotypes which shape attitudes towards migrants, which in turn can create an internalised sense of powerlessness.

Often social workers can help groups and individuals to see where their spheres of influence might be situated and attempt to raise their problem with those at higher levels of power within society. An analysis relying on the power cube can make it more concrete where individuals' possibilities lie, thereby helping groups to emerge from dialogues regarding their values in order to form an actual plan of action. For further examples on how to use the power cube, Gaventa (2019) offers 16 examples in his chapter, 'Applying power analysis: using the "powercube"', to explore forms, levels, and spaces in further detail.

Precautions in advocacy

Whilst advocacy remains a core task for social work practice, we cannot move forward without understanding the cost of advocacy. There are real, tangible, and unintended ways in which engaging in advocacy can deplete scarce resources, both in relation to time and to financial reserves, at times even working against the cause. Bad publicity, a loss of social capital or alienation, and false hope all demand discussion and exploration by both the service user and the professional before undertaking these advocacy efforts. More positively, advocacy carries benefits, although the criteria for success and the desired outcomes must be clearly defined.

Furthermore, according to Freire (2000, 127), those in positions of power are not inherently predisposed to listen, given that their primary concern lies in maintaining control rather than engaging in dialogue. In addition, as Beddoe (2024) reminds us, the struggle for just societies can be hard. These points, however, only emphasise the importance of cultivating a strong community and a solid value base. Sharing thoughts and perspectives with others and articulating what is important can also act as a kind of armour in work towards a more sustainable future. A strong value base can also serve as the foundation for establishing contact with others pursuing the same agenda. Recalling the introduction to this chapter, strength builds through relationships and solidarity—locally, nationally, and internationally—whereby an awareness of being a part of a global professional network with the same goal of collective wellbeing also helps.

Finally, caution must be taken to ensure that advocacy—especially when carried out on behalf of someone—does not stifle their voice; balancing reciprocity and conviviality amongst those whose case or cause advocacy is the focus of action must be preserved in order to avoid reproducing unjust power relations. Scholars such as Timothée Parrique (2019) from the field of macroeconomics, Françoise Vergès (2021) from the field of decolonial feminism, and Heather Boetto (2019) from the field of eco-social work advocate for decolonising the mind, emphasising

that a dignified life—grounded in autonomy, sufficiency, and care—must be accessible to all, or it cannot truly exist for anyone.

Or, as so beautifully expressed by Australian Indigenous activist Lilla Watson,

If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together. (Watson in Vergès, 2021, p. 19)

VISION and advocacy

As this chapter shows, the task of advocacy for a sustainable future requires a solid value base, collectivism, and community. Beyond this, engaging in advocacy requires an ethical foundation, knowledge, skills, and passion, all of which the practitioner working with individuals and groups can clarify by using VISION. As previously mentioned, VISION has also been developed for use in teaching sustainability-related subjects and specifically to raise awareness amongst social work students regarding its role for a sustainable future. Social work is a normative profession with a strong ethical framework as described by all of the international social work bodies (IFSW et al. 2020; IFSW, 2018; IFSW, 2014). Becoming a professional social worker is not simply a process of adapting uncritically. Educating professionals who can speak to power demands nurturing their ability to think and to reflect by and for themselves, allowing students to develop their own positions in relation to the fundamental values of the profession. VISION was also developed to assist with this process.

In this way, VISION serves as a method for dialogue, facilitating interactions amongst individuals occupying diverse positions. Whilst VISION can be employed within an advocacy framework, it should not be viewed as a comprehensive advocacy process on its own. When a VISION dialogue aims at advocacy, it may be beneficial to include an observer who can summarise key take-away messages and assist the facilitator in documenting the needs and aspirations of VISION participants for future advocacy efforts. Moreover, it is advisable to engage participants in post-VISION dialogues regarding actionable steps they can take to amplify their voices in future advocacy actions. These may include using the power cube to map power dynamics. Regardless of the specific case, a debriefing is advisable when ending a VISION dialogue used specifically for advocacy purposes.

This chapter was about...

How VISION can be used for advocacy purposes through:

- Creating space for dialogues. At the macro-level, VISION gives social workers tools and a format for facilitating dialogues between people coming from varying positions of power and diverse backgrounds, to listen to and learn from each other. This includes inviting decision-makers and politicians to the table as human beings instead of merely representing their official roles. The idea is to make values visible and support dialogues, also bringing awareness to those at the policy development level, to meet each other as human beings where listening is potentially a little easier since the subject focuses on shared human values rather than politics.

- **Creating community.** At the meso-level, VISION offers social workers tools and a format for establishing dialogues in and with groups. Building a shared and solid foundation of values through VISION dialogues and activities can unite a group or community, establish a collective direction, and sharpen stakeholder arguments. Simultaneously, it can create a space for mutual support in situations when group members are not listened to by those in power.
- **Strengthening voices.** At the micro-level, VISION tools can help social workers prepare for processes and meetings in situations involving both cause and case advocacy efforts. These tools can be used in one-on-one dialogues with service users to promote value awareness and foster empowerment, enabling individuals to participate with their own voice, even in contexts of injustice.
- **Building self-awareness.** VISION can be used by social workers to become aware of their own values and better distinguish between their own values and those of service users. This is crucial in advocacy, where the social worker sometimes takes up the cause of others and must set aside their personal values in order to work from the perspective of the service users.
- **Building armour.** The development of competencies required when wanting to speak to power can be cultivated through VISION dialogues. A strong foundation in values can also serve as armour for the sometimes hard task of engaging in advocacy.

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