

12. The Global Call to Action against Poverty

International voices for change



Examples of the white band worn by GCAP supporters

The Global Call to Action against Poverty (GCAP) is the world's largest civil-society movement calling for an end to poverty and inequality. It has involved millions of people in mass protests and has had some significant successes in changing policies and promises on aid, trade, and development and in articulating the voices of poor and marginalised people. This paper examines the movement's strategies and achievements, and looks at the challenges that remain.

Introduction

The Global Call to Action against Poverty (GCAP) is the world's largest civil-society alliance of social movements, international non-government organisations (NGOs), trade unions, community groups, women's organisations, faith and youth groups, local associations, and campaigners working together across more than 100 national coalitions/platforms to end the structural causes of poverty and inequality.¹ To date, it has involved over 50 million people on every continent of the world² calling for action from the world's leaders to meet their promises to end poverty and achieve the Millennium Development Goals.

Mass mobilisation by GCAP raises public awareness of the structural causes of poverty, and strengthens advocacy work at national level. It provides a platform for those living in poverty to take an active part in the political decision-making processes that most affect them.

Each country mounts its own campaign involving thousands of people, so GCAP has taken place in a wide variety of different local contexts, with different political targets, and different constituencies.

GCAP's largest mobilisations have been on 17 October every year; this is International Day for the Eradication of Poverty. Over 47.3 million people took part in the 'Stand Up' campaign on that day in 2007.³ Many of those who become involved wear a white band to demonstrate the truly worldwide nature of the campaign.

GCAP has been supported by international figures such as Brazilian President Lula da Silva, and Nelson Mandela, who said: 'As long as poverty, injustice and gross inequality persist in our world, none of us can truly rest...The Global Call to Action against Poverty can take its place as a public movement alongside the movement to abolish slavery and the international solidarity against apartheid'.⁴

Furthermore, GCAP is an open platform for organisations and campaigns working on social-justice issues to link in numerous ways. Oxfam supports GCAP globally. At the same time, its national offices are frequently linked with GCAP national coalitions, and GCAP often supports Oxfam's thematic campaigns, particularly at the national level.

This paper outlines a few of the strategies and processes used by GCAP in a number of different countries. It looks at its success in affecting policy change and outlines the challenges facing such a global movement.

From love affair to married couple...a history of GCAP

In September 2003, Graca Machel, international advocate for women's and children's rights, hosted a meeting of NGOs in Maputo, Mozambique, where the idea of GCAP first emerged, supported by prominent civil-society activists such as Civicus Secretary-General Kumi Naidoo. In 2004, GCAP launched a campaign and issued a declaration known as the Johannesburg Declaration.

In 2005, there was a groundswell of activity on the issue of poverty. There was an unprecedented level of involvement from civil society at the Gleneagles G8 summit, a forum whose doors had traditionally been closed to anyone except the heads of the richest states. This involvement resulted in a commitment by the G8 countries to improve the quality and quantity of their aid. The first substantial commitments to debt cancellation were made, and there was a feeling that civil society, by having its voices heard, was able to contribute to policy change on poverty issues in meaningful ways.

In 2006 and 2007, GCAP faced a bit of an identity crisis. The level of response to the Call to Action was so overwhelming that there was unanimous agreement that it was a movement that had to be continued beyond 2005. However, the leading organisations did not have a co-ordinated way of capitalising on this enthusiasm and translating it into steps forward for a global coalition against poverty. As Ana Agostino, co-chair of GCAP, said: 'It's like a passionate love affair; in making our mobilisation plans, we're always trying to relive the enthusiasm, the passion of 2005, and we are going to have to admit that it's not something we can recreate. The political environment has changed, and the hearts and minds of the public have changed. We're now an old, married coalition, and we need to find a way to adjust to our new circumstances'.⁵

GCAP responded by developing its structures, promoting internal learning about the value and role of the coalition, building national coalitions, and solidifying GCAP as a participant in policy-making forums. Global strategies focused on: amplifying actions against poverty led by national coalitions or coalition members at the global level, and mass mobilisation on global days.

Fighting poverty: goals, issues, and structure

GCAP aims are to: 'Fight the structural determinants and causes of poverty and challenge the institutions and processes that perpetuate poverty and inequality across the world', and to 'work for the defence and promotion of human rights, gender equality and social justice'.⁶

Its latest public declaration in 2007, known as the Montevideo Declaration, says: 'We are committed to democratising the values, mechanisms and processes of negotiation and decision making in the interest of the poorest and marginalised people, and to ensuring that equity, human security and inclusion are the core principles around which global, regional and local governance is organised.'⁷

The main issues on which GCAP campaigns include:

- public accountability, just governance, and the fulfilment of human rights
- trade justice
- a major increase in the quantity and quality of aid and financing for development
- debt cancellation
- gender equality
- countering climate chaos.

GCAP has an International Facilitation Team (IFT), in which all regions are represented, and members voice concerns and actions. The IFT represents national coalitions, international organisations, youth and children, workers, and religious constituencies. Similar structures have been established at the regional level, with the Asian, African, and Latin American Facilitation Teams. There are also a variety of task forces. Some are functional, on media, mobilisation, and e-communications, and others are ad hoc, or represent a particular constituency such as children and youth, or women.

Three examples of the way GCAP has worked are women's tribunals, refugee testimonies, and lobbying international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Women's Tribunals: voices for change

GCAP's women's task force organised a series of International Women's Tribunals Against Poverty, highlighting the feminisation of poverty. With women constituting 70 per cent of the world's poor people, the tribunals served to present the testimonies of women on the conditions they face and to put pressure on governments to take action.

For example, the tribunals in Peru took place on 17 October 2007, International Day for the Eradication of Poverty. They aimed to highlight the situation endured by women living in rural areas, who are more vulnerable to poverty and prevented from exercising their rights and citizenship on a daily basis. The cases presented were: issues arising from a lack of official documents, rape in internal armed conflict, rape of indigenous girls, and forced sterilisation.

Bringing these cases to a tribunal made explicit the link between poverty and the violation of human rights. Clear demands were presented to the Peruvian government on issues of documentation, gender-sensitive education, access to contraceptives, and increased legislative and judicial support for survivors of sexual violence and rape.

Other tribunals have taken place in different countries throughout the world where they have proven to be a powerful way of making the voices of marginalised women heard.

The primary challenge encountered by the tribunals is how to link them with ongoing processes of advocacy and policy making in order to bring about change. In part due to the cross-cutting nature of gender-justice issues, targeting key local political opportunities has been difficult, and depending on the local context, GCAP coalitions have struggled to follow up with demands presented to political decision-makers. While Peru had the advantage of support from strong national coalitions already engaged on gender issues, other countries hoping to replicate the model have needed support in linking to ongoing advocacy networks. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the tribunal proved to be an outreach opportunity for the coalition, strengthening ties to women's-rights activists.

The perspectives from these tribunals were all taken to the Commission on the Status of Women in New York, which took place on International Women's Day 2007. Mobilisation plans for 2008 were launched at the event, and advocacy efforts at the UN focused on the GEAR campaign (UN Gender Equality Architecture Reform).

Ana Agostino, GCAP co-chair, said: 'Numbers tell a story, and the story they tell is about the feminisation of poverty. Women are disproportionately affected by poverty and inequality, and we have so many measures to tell us this. However, what the women's tribunals demonstrate is that poverty is not a number. Poverty is about people, and peoples' lives. We can take a lot from statistics, but we need to be mindful in policy making forums that decisions about numbers, about budgets, are decisions about the way women and men live their lives'.⁸

Refugee testimonies

On 17 October 2007 in South Africa, the GCAP coalition organised 'Refugee Testimonies Against Poverty and Inequality' at the Methodist Church in Johannesburg, in which refugees spoke about their experiences of violence, and lack of access to services. Representatives from the Department of Home Affairs and the police service attended, hearing first-hand people's experiences of lack of documentation, xenophobia, arbitrary detentions, denial of basic

services, and other violations of rights, often caused by those with the responsibility to protect and uphold those very rights.

This is what Emmanuel Mulamba, of the Johannesburg Refugee Ministries, said: 'As a refugee in Johannesburg, we face exclusion from all angles. The asylum process is inadequate, and even when we have made successful claims, service providers, banks, employers and others refuse to recognise the legitimacy of our papers. Xenophobia is rampant in the department of home affairs and within the police, meaning that we have nowhere to turn for support. Through the Refugee Testimonies, we have been given the chance to voice our concerns. We don't expect all our problems to be solved, but at least we have started engaging with people who can change this ongoing exclusion. We are raising awareness about xenophobia, and as public attitudes change, we hope to get different treatment from public institutions'.⁹

Only two months after the testimonies were held, police raided the Methodist Church that was serving as a shelter to many homeless refugees, brutalising and illegally detaining hundreds of people. Six months later, waves of xenophobic attacks left over 50 migrants to South Africa dead, and thousands more displaced. Civil-society leaders who took part in the refugee testimonies were key in quelling the rioting and facilitating the reintegration of migrants into their communities.

This case has demonstrated that some of the traditional advocacy tools in GCAP are now inadequate for addressing the needs of the most marginalised people, who in various ways fall outside traditional structures of state accountability and protection.

In the case of South Africa, the policies to promote the rights of refugees are in place, but there is inadequate implementation. This is not a unique situation. As a response, the GCAP coalition is working through the People's Budget Campaign, a civil-society shadow of the national budget, to call for a programme that will create awareness in the public sector of xenophobia and the rights of refugees. This will ensure that the refugee testimonies can speak to people who are empowered to listen to their messages, and make changes. Combining testimonies with advocacy around resource allocation and budgeting is a strategy that some GCAP constituents have used successfully, and more are taking on board as a way of ensuring that people's voices are heard and listened to by those with the power to bring about change.

Lobbying international financial institutions

International financial institutions (IFIs) such as the World Bank and the IMF have been a key political target of GCAP. Throughout GCAP's constituencies, there has been recognition that the conditions

of many IMF loans (known as conditionalities) are harmful to vulnerable people. Attention has been brought to this through media work at global and national level, as well as through symbolic actions by activists at the IFI meetings. Grassroots ‘ambassadors’ affected by the policies of the IFIs have taken part in awareness raising and protest, and mass mobilisation has taken place in both the North and South to call for reform.

However, the room for civil-society engagement to create change has so far been very limited, and many GCAP constituents have failed to find a political ‘hook’, or target capable of enacting the changes demanded. While voices were being raised against decisions that exacerbated poverty and inequality, they were not being heard by the decision-makers.

This was partly because finding a way of forming national demands has been a challenge. In 2008, the GCAP coalition in Bangladesh protested against the IMF’s Policy Support Instrument,¹⁰ which is supposed to enable the IMF to support low-income countries that do not want - or need - financial assistance, but who might still seek advice, monitoring, and endorsement of their economic policies from the IMF. The protestors believed it had conditionalities attached that would be harmful to the most vulnerable populations. In spite of marches, protests, and petitions, decisions were being made behind closed doors. Finally, civil-society activists successfully took the government to the High Court, preventing them from signing the Policy Support Instrument. In the case of Bangladesh, civil society was speaking out, but because the political decisions were being made in a different space, they were not being heard. Litigation was a way of forcing the government to listen to the voices of poor people.

In many countries around the world, as well as at the international level, the legislation in place is pro-poor. However, because of a lack of accountability, laws and agreements are often bypassed. Litigation could prove to be a powerful tool for ensuring that those who are calling for justice are heard by decision-makers.

In another example from Bangladesh, a national Women’s Development Policy was passed in February, leading to widespread changes in the gender representation of the public sector, as well as having wider implications for women’s rights, such as increased maternity leave. While these policy changes cannot be attributed to one specific intervention, there is no doubt that the collective efforts of women expressing the challenges they face in Bangladesh and throughout the sub-region have contributed to a collective momentum for gender justice. Such popular support for change could not have been created without the drive and awareness raising from those who have the most vested interests in such a change.

Personal profiles: some of the people who took part in the 'Stand Up and Speak Out' global mobilisation in 2007¹¹

In Liberia, Jonathan Koffa of Monrovia is a 26-year-old musician and singer on the national scene known as Takun J. He says: 'My message to world leaders, the IMF and the World Bank is that they must do more in the shortest time to right out Liberia's debt without conditions. Liberia has just emerged from over 14 years of war which left all sectors of our country destroyed including infrastructure, economy, educational institutions, health facilities, etc. These leaders must be practical in their pledge to meet the MDGs'.

In Germany, 25-year-old student Katharina Weltecke volunteered for the 'Stand Up and Speak Out' activities planned by the local GCAP campaign, 'Deine Stimme gegen Armut' ('Your voice against poverty'). She believes that no time should be wasted reminding those responsible politically to fulfill the MDGs. 'Governments have to make a greater effort than in the past to eliminate the structural causes of poverty.' Katharina came face to face with the effect of poverty while studying in South Africa where she witnessed the devastating impact of HIV and AIDS.

In Pakistan, Syeda Ghulam Fatima Gillani is a 41-year-old women's-rights activist and trade unionist, and a member of the Bonded Labour Liberation Front, the Citizen Council of Pakistan, and the South Asian Alliance for Poverty Eradication. She believes that the neglect of women in developing countries, especially in Pakistan, is a matter for urgent attention. On 17 October 2007 she was one of the people to hold up the world's longest banner which she signed with her demands. This signed banner was used to remind states of their obligations to eradicate poverty and especially to develop gender equality. It said: 'Please allocate 25 per cent of GDP to provide education, health and training to women, especially in rural areas, to uplift their standard of living. Reduce expenditure on the defence and spend it on the eradication of poverty'.

Achievements and challenges

GCAP has had a part in some other successes over the past few years, including:¹²

- European commitments to increase aid to 0.56 per cent by 2010 and 0.7 per cent by 2015
- renewal of G8 pledges to double aid
- agreement to cancel the debts of 18 heavily indebted poor countries and Nigeria
- a commitment by the G8 that they will no longer force poor countries to liberalise their economies¹³
- numerous national-level policy changes, from the institution of school feeding schemes in Niger, to a more pro-poor health policy in Russia, to a Better Aid bill in Canada.

Most of GCAP's strengths, which have allowed it to achieve its successes, are simultaneously its biggest challenges.

A coalition of the willing

GCAP's effectiveness depends on the activity level and ownership of its members. Without lively and strong national coalitions that are equally led by those living in poverty and supported by informed policy analysis by supporters, GCAP would cease to exist. However, it also means that there is a kind of 'whoever can, does' attitude within GCAP; most activities are taken on by a coalition of the willing. While this is not inherently problematic, in many cases it has led to a de facto division of labour with a significant portion of GCAP work.

Resources and representation

Because of a lack of all kinds of resources, many national coalitions and leaders of socially excluded groups do not have the time and capacity to lead on GCAP activities at the global level. The demographics of many groups leading GCAP activities globally are not always representative of the campaign as a whole. Because they have the resources and technical capacity, a political steer often comes from international NGOs (often Northern-led), rather than the grassroots constituents.

GCAP has instituted a number of measures to address this, including regional, gender-based, and other quotas of representation, and enabling wider participation by looking at creative solutions to the technological and linguistic requirements for participating in discussions. A constituency group of socially excluded peoples is also coming together to have a voice on the global council.

The tribunals that took place in 2007 were also a good model in responding to the challenge of representation. They showed how political leadership on policy issues is created by those living in poverty while still allowing space for those engaged in policy-level debates, and those active in grassroots mobilisation to continue to bring their skills to the table.

Sharing good practices

GCAP is a loose alliance with a diverse base, and it is not unusual for this to create confusion rather than synergy. Decision-making processes can be unclear, lines of communication are easily muddled, and work can be duplicated. In the worst-case scenario, some constituents could undermine the work of others. So far, a strong sense of common purpose has been sufficient to resolve any such conflicts, and most constituencies have developed normalised ways of working between them. Beginning in 2008, a group specifically mandated with facilitating learning between constituencies was created. Because GCAP is so broad, and works in so many different

political contexts, sharing good practices internally is a way of strengthening the coalition.

Links

Another challenge for GCAP has been to make explicit the links between popular mobilisation, awareness raising, and policy change. In some cases, this has already been explicit, while in others, a complex variety of factors have contributed to change, and GCAP has had to look broadly at a range of different forms of participation to see which have been the most successful.

Shaping civil-society space

One area where GCAP has achieved increasing success is in working towards creating a norm of civil-society space in a wide range of policy-making forums. At national, regional, and global levels, GCAP is finally in a position that makes it able not only to respond to decisions or react to events but to engage in processes as well. This is not true at all levels, or for all processes, but where it is the case, it has contributed to legitimacy for civil-society participation in a wider array of discussions than before. As a coalition whose constituents have a wide range of views, a clear added value of GCAP is to encourage the creation of space for civil society across the board.

The past three years have demonstrated the need for GCAP to exist globally. Issues affecting poverty and inequality are not isolated, nor do they respect national boundaries. Given the remarkably similar goals of all GCAP constituents, there are few other platforms for taking common actions, showing solidarity, and sharing learning. It remains a challenge to take such an array of different contexts, actions, and results in different countries and harmonise them in such a way that the whole will be greater than the parts.

Notes

¹ GCAP (2007) 'Annual Report 2007', www.whiteband.org/about-gcap/reports/search?SearchableText=annual+AND+report%2A (last accessed September 2008).

² This is the author's estimate based on rough figures. It is impossible to have firm numbers for this.

³ See www.whiteband.org (last accessed September 2008).

⁴ 'Nelson Mandela backs Global Call to Action against Poverty', www.whiteband.org/media/gcap-news/archives/gcapnews.2007-04-18.7740150588/?searchterm=nelson%20mandela?searchterm=nelson%20mandela (last accessed September 2008).

⁵ From a transcript of a meeting with GCAP Council Chairs, 18 March 2008, Civicus House, Johannesburg, South Africa.

⁶ Montevideo Global Meeting, 2007, www.whiteband.org/about-gcap/reports/ift/montevideo-global-meeting-may-2007 (last accessed September 2008). The Montevideo Declaration was issued on 5 May 2007 from the GCAP Assembly held in Montevideo, Uruguay. It was issued by all GCAP national coalitions as the official communiqué of the meeting.

⁷ From the GCAP website www.whiteband.org (last accessed September 2008).

⁸ From a transcript of a press conference, held on 8 March 2008 (International Women's Day) to launch the GCAP 2008 mobilisation plans. It was held at Constitution Hill in Johannesburg.

⁹ From the transcripts of the South African refugee testimonies, held on 17 October 2007 at the Central Methodist Church in Johannesburg.

¹⁰ International Monetary Fund (2007) 'The Policy Support Instrument', www.imf.org/external/np/exr/facts/psi.htm (last accessed September 2008).

¹¹ www.whiteband.org/media/press-info/regional-personal-profiles-some-of-the-people-taking-part-in-stand-up-speak-out

¹² For more details see www.whiteband.org (last accessed September 2008).

¹³ From the Montevideo Declaration, 2007 'Montevideo Global Meeting, 2007', www.whiteband.org/about-gcap/reports/ift/montevideo-global-meeting-may-2007 (last accessed September 2008).

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