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# Scaling global change campaigns

*It is tempting to assume that public support for the SDGs is a given. But is it? How can the international community ensure that citizens around the world rally behind the goals?*

By **Jamie Drummond**,  
Executive Director and Global Strategy, ONE

**A**s we consider how to achieve the newly agreed Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), it is essential that we invest in building the team to score these goals, and spurring this team onto winning actions. Many great interventions that could save lives are never scaled. Many great policies that could transform lives are never adopted. Why? Because people didn't get organised and demand them. Whether you agree with all or any of the new SDGs, the key to ensuring their realisation is investment in sophisticated campaigns.

◀ **UNHCR Special Envoy Angelina Jolie meets ethnic Kachin refugee children at a camp in Burma. Celebrity endorsement has proved extremely effective in raising public awareness and support, and in turn political support**

What strategies can activists implement that might help influence policymakers' decisions? One approach worth scrutinising underpins ONE, the group I co-founded with Bono over a decade ago. With the support of many partners, our work has arguably delivered some significant results: helping to cancel 100 per cent of the debts of 35 of the world's poorest countries; reforming trade, transparency and anti-corruption laws; nearly doubling smart aid to Africa; and scale-funding tried-and-tested interventions to fight HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria and child-killing diseases in the developing world.

One way to measure the outcome of these campaigns is to track the extraordinary drop in annual deaths from AIDS – by nearly 50 per cent – and in child mortality, with 3.7 million fewer children dying each year from preventable, treatable diseases in 2014 compared to 2000. That's about 10,000 fewer children dying every day.

We've campaigned for these global social change policies by applying a sort of 'secret sauce' – a rough recipe we've dubbed the "4Ps". It is outlined here in the hope that it spurs more analysis of a dangerously under-studied subject: what makes effective advocacy.

#### **P1: policy that is evidence-based**

It is revealing how many campaigns avoid disciplining their approach by not assessing what works and what doesn't. Organisations must test firmly held beliefs with evidence by building a sound network of relations with both think tanks and implementers.

For example, when we worked on debt relief, we backed a successful pilot project in Uganda. When we worked on AIDS treatments, we campaigned for the scaling up of pilot programmes run by Médecins Sans Frontières and Partners In Health, who helped people living with HIV in resource-poor settings adhere to complex drug regimens. Right now, we're campaigning for funds for Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, which

invests in vaccines tested with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

These innovative partnerships to develop and enhance evidence-based policy tend to work best when the grassroots realities of citizens in the developing world stay central to the design. They must be treated as partners and clients to be served, not people to be patronised by overpaid experts flown in at considerable expense. Bono has labelled this evidence-based activism as "factivism".

#### **P2: politically non-partisan**

Second, in a democracy at least, you need to deal with power directly – whoever yields it. Lefty activists: that means you have to hang out with people on the Right. To those on the Right: you, too, have to deal with the other side; you must listen to their ideas and policy proposals. And you know what? Sometimes their ideas are better than yours.

When this strategy delivers compromise between the two sides, the resulting policy is usually politically longer-lasting. Examples include the US President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, the UK's historic commitment to 0.7 per cent of gross national income on foreign assistance, and the original Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative.

These programmes stick around and build a foundation for further improvements because of broad, carefully constructed, global coalitions between governments, faith groups, activists, corporates and foundations. This approach doesn't mean you shouldn't challenge power – you must. But it does demand an end to endless oppositional point-scoring.

Being non-partisan demands some pragmatism, by which ONE means the ability to accept incremental progress. This is often a natural result of working within political realities and the grubby business of doing deals. Imagine this: a politician starts listening to your campaign because he's read about it in the papers and received a ton of mail. He calls you into his office and wants to do a deal: "I'll promise to do 62.3 per cent of what you're demanding, and you have to praise it as if it's 100 per cent."

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This is a very good development – it means you’re in negotiation. But who are you to strike the deal? What gives you the legitimacy to negotiate on behalf of millions of people who are thousands of miles away? And what is the right compromise? These are painfully difficult questions to answer. Unfortunately in any given year, most politicians can give you only a piece of what you demand. They actually don’t have much power.

The stunning realisation is that they need whatever political power and capital you have amassed through campaigning in order to get the issue through the political process – and a measure of your political power depends on how many people can be mobilised in support of the issue you’re working on. That is the source of political legitimacy. That’s where the third P comes in.

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### ***As Bono has put it: “Celebrity has currency, and I want to use that currency wisely”***

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#### **P3: public pressure**

Smart policy ideas and adept political inside manoeuvring only get you so far. What’s key is broad-based public support, plus the proven ability to mobilise support in key constituencies, at short notice and in key moments within the political process.

New technologies and social media have, on many levels, made this much easier – note the millions of people we signed up to our recent Poverty is Sexist campaign in 2015; the hundreds of thousands our partners at Global Citizen mobilised to harangue the White House on aid levels to the poorest countries; and the millions that Change.org, Avaaz and others regularly incite to action.

But disintermediation of the media has also made it harder to reach huge audiences. This suggests the mass movements of the future must be more about building alliances between smaller, single-issue

campaigns. This is complex but doable – Change.org is nearly doing this – though it doesn’t deliver the amassed members all at once.

To achieve this still requires a lot of organising and political negotiation, for which no amount of new tech and social media can substitute. But these old-fashioned skills are at risk of under-investment in terms of both time and money. One means of quickly overcoming media disintermediation is through harnessing the power of celebrity and popular culture – the fourth P.

#### **P4: popular culture**

We’ve done this countless times since Drop the Debt in the late 1990s. The Global Citizen and Poverty is Sexist campaigns are, right now, experiments in the same vein. It works. To take your boring but important proposal (and trust us, few things are as dull as developing-country debt ratios...) and make it big, you have to find a way to put it into the primetime spotlight. That often requires the sugar-coating of celebrity endorsements. Sorry.

Busy politicians pay much more attention when they are either going to get public credit for responding to your campaign, or fear public criticism for not doing so. Praise or criticism is delivered through the media and, today, through social media. So one tactic is to coat the policy substance with celebrity, thereby shifting it from the margins into mainstream. Some find this approach appalling. They argue that we should do the right thing because it’s the right thing to do, not because it adopts a pop culture gloss. But we have to start where most people are: on YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, or bingeing on games like *Clash of Clans* or hit TV shows like *Game of Thrones*. We must engage there and offer to take them on a journey.

For example, hundreds of thousands joined ONE when Brad Pitt asked them to do so in an ABC interview with Diane Sawyer after a trip to Africa. Many of those who joined then – some probably as a result of their interest in a media personality – are today regularly taking action on corruption in the oil and gas sector, and the lack

of electricity in rural Africa. That’s quite a journey from where their activism started. As Bono has put it: “Celebrity has currency, and I want to use that currency wisely”. Today of course you must court celebrities with massive social media followings – those who understand how to speak in direct, authentic ways that people can trust.

So there you have the 4Ps. We’ve found them effective. But I’ll let you into a secret. There is a fifth P: the prophetic.

This P embarrasses most of my colleagues but in the view of other campaigners, it is essential. By this P, I mean the fundamental values that demand we be better; that bring us out of the daily grind to ponder the demanding, complicated ideals of equality and justice. It doesn’t require an exclusively religious worldview.

At their best, organisations like ONE, Change.org and Avaaz – and movements like action/2015 – offer members a sense of purpose, connectedness and wellbeing that are grounds for optimism about the future of humanity. They help us express the better angels of our nature. This dimension needs to be nurtured to overcome everyday apathy. It needs to be harnessed to overwhelm the darker forces that drive young men and women to join extremist groups and commit horrific acts of terror.

Our humanity faces an imminent choice. In 2015, world leaders fitfully agreed a roadmap on poverty reduction and sustainable development for the next generation. There is great opportunity and great jeopardy before us all.

For example, by some projections the world’s population is set to grow to more than nine billion by 2050. Two and half billion of these people will be in Africa, which will host 40 per cent of the world’s youth by then. This youthful energy could be a fuel for a stable, prosperous global economy, or it could prove an explosive mix for all the world’s inhabitants if their aspirations are thwarted by corruption, disease and environmental degradation.

These obstacles can be overcome, but only if we deploy and iterate the social change strategies considered here. Only then can we build the accountability movements required to ensure that the global



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▲ An HIV sufferer receives antiretroviral therapy pills from a Partners In Health (PIH) nurse in Tomsk, Russia. Pilot programmes run by MSF and PIH are a good example of how evidence should shape policy

goals to fight poverty, inequality and climate change are actually implemented.

There are steps that can be taken to scale social change advocacy of the kind outlined by the 4Ps. First, philanthropists must be less timid and fund more risky advocacy of this kind if they are serious about the change they wish to see in the world.

Second, the entertainment industry must be courted more deliberately and intelligently. Imagine a short MBA on world affairs for jaded Hollywood (and Bollywood and Bollywood) executives. Or Red Nose Day-type telethons in key emerging markets like Nigeria, Tanzania, Ghana and India,

connecting the burgeoning middle classes with their country's poorest, mediated by the power of their own celebrities and vernacular popular culture.

Third, we need to address the data crisis in development policy. We need a more efficient system to facilitate rapid feedback from the field about which policies and interventions are working and which are not. Today, one third of births and two thirds of deaths in the world aren't registered and datasets on extreme poverty are often a decade or more out of date. And this data crisis is sexist: the data is particularly bad or absent when it comes to the poorest women and girls. This is ironic because usually, interventions tailored for them are the most effective. These unnecessary inefficiencies urgently need addressing.

Finally, we need clarity in annual campaigning purpose. According to research conducted by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, there are over 50 million citizens in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development nations who want to take action on global social causes, but don't because they are not sure what to do or whom to trust.

Given the impact their support could have on the challenges faced by the world, this is a tragedy. And there are hundreds of millions of people in the developing world who want to do the right thing too.

By harnessing the power of the 4Ps we can build effective, informed movements to help people everywhere influence policy – and ensure promises are kept. ●