

Jo Becker. *Campaigning for Justice: Human Rights Advocacy in Practice.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013. viii + 318 pages \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8047-7451-2.



Reviewed by Hanne Hagtvedt Vik

Published on H-Diplo (September, 2013)

Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

What has characterized recent cases where international human rights advocacy has succeeded? This is the question asked by Jo Becker in her book *Campaigning for Justice: Human Rights Advocacy in Practice*. The editor of the Stanford Studies of Human Rights series see the book as a much-needed antidote to the perceived gap in the literature between human rights theory and the practice of human rights advocacy. However, the author had a more limited ambition: Becker seeks to enable new and experienced human rights advocates to learn from the experiences of others to employ the most effective strategies in their work.

Becker is a human rights activist with a long history with Human Rights Watch, and she has observed and contributed to several of the campaigns she describes. The book is based on interviews with about fifty activists and other practitioners, supplemented by personal experiences and various reports, documents, and news clippings.

From this basis, Becker constructs a panorama of contemporary human rights activism. The book is well written and delves into the context and details of eleven recent cases of international human rights activism. Each chapter is a chronological narrative of one case. It gives a detailed overview of how that particular human rights campaign evolved, includes a profile of one of the involved human rights activists, and is concluded by lessons learned from the particular case. Becker provides rich detail on most of her cases, and reflects in her concluding chapter on the lessons learned for human rights advocacy.

The cases described range from campaigns geared towards developing new international standards to those that seek to change a particular local or national practice. For example, Becker describes the efforts by human rights activists to impose an international minimum recruitment age for child soldiers; to achieve accountability for war crimes in Sri Lanka; to promote lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights in Nepal and Jamaica; to ban sentences of life with-

out patrol in California; and to heighten the level of international attention to the situation in Tibet. The geographic locations of the campaigns described in the book are many and varied. Some campaigns were predominately local, others were global.

To those interested in the role of human rights activism in contemporary international politics, the main contribution of the book is that it demonstrates how much international human rights advocacy has changed and matured over the past decades. The literature on the history of human rights has described how in the 1940s only a relatively limited group of inspired individuals and organizations advocated ideas and standards of human rights. During the 1970s, human rights became a mainstream political concern and the number of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) dedicated to human rights grew rapidly alongside the institutionalization of human rights concerns within government structures and in intergovernmental organizations.[1] Today human rights advocacy takes place within a professionalized and multifaceted system of instruments, institutions, and organizations on local, national, regional, and international levels.

Becker shows how professional organizations like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International are like spiders that are ready to initiate, facilitate, and coordinate political action across local and international political levels and entities. These organizations monitor local developments and cooperate with ad hoc initiatives and local organizations to design and carry out political campaigns. They provide communication resources, research capacity and credibility, in-depth knowledge of the institutional, political, and legal processes of individual governments and the UN and other international organizations, and shrewd judgments of political windows of opportunities.

Becker's descriptions of the almost symbiotic relationships between UN special rapporteurs and human rights NGOs are particularly revealing.

"Some forty-five independent experts and working groups monitor human rights for the United Nations," she explains (p. 77). Human rights NGOs have worked to establish new special rapporteurs and to provide those in office with timely and accessible information that enables them to prepare visits and reports. At the end of his term as the UN special rapporteur on torture, Manfred Nowak assessed that NGOs were the "most important source of information in planning his missions" (p. 91). This is not a new development. Theo van Boven, director of the United Nations' Division for Human Rights from 1977 to 1982, has recalled that "eighty-five percent of our information came from NGOs." [2] What has changed is the sheer number and geographic reach of rapporteurs, working groups, and NGOs dedicated to human rights. These constitute a professionalized and global international monitoring system based on intimate cooperation across organizational boundaries.

Each chapter includes some discussion of results. Becker points out how the ultimate goals--like a free Tibet or curbing practices of violence against children--often remain elusive despite intense advocacy by human rights NGOs. It comes across as easier to succeed in adopting new international instruments for human rights protection than to change particular state practices. All campaigns have in various ways led to heightened international and local attention to human rights abuses, including in recruiting new human rights activists. In some of her cases, Becker finds that some states have changed their practices as a result of international campaigns, including in the cases of LGBT rights and minimum recruitment age for child soldiers.

In her concluding chapter, Becker posits that "human rights advocacy is an art, not a science" (p. 258). There are various tools and strategies available to activists, and Becker argues that there are some success factors to take into consideration when building a human rights campaign.

These, she finds, include building diverse and broad-based alliances which include those most affected by the human rights abuses, being able to exploit political windows of opportunity, providing credible research and documentation, and using multiple points of leverage.

The book tells success stories of the contributions and significance of human rights NGOs. While such stories are important and interesting, an ambition more in line with the one of the series' editor, perhaps with fewer cases, could have allowed the author to flesh out more aspects of her stories of the practices of human rights advocacy in the contemporary international system.

There are two main problems with the book from an academic perspective. First, Becker does not explicitly engage with the academic literature on human rights (except in the appendix on further reading). Had she discussed her approach, choices, and findings in the context of theoretical and empirical works on human rights advocacy, this might have enabled her to push her arguments further, and discuss them more systematically, at least in the introductory and concluding chapters. For example, assessment of results is an aspect of the story where an explicit engagement with academic literature would have enhanced the value of the book.[3]

Secondly, partly related to the first problem, because Becker focuses on lessons learned from effective strategies for human rights advocacy, she offers only passing mention of highly relevant aspects of human rights activism. For example, the author does not make a systematic attempt to explain how other actors may enable transnational human rights activism. Governments are mentioned in most chapters, but their roles remain elusive. One example here is that the rapidly expanding activities of human rights organizations must have required quite substantial funding. Becker mentions how some governments helped fund the work of the coalition of NGOs that fought the practice of child soldiers (p. 16). However, the

successful local NGO working for LGBT rights in Nepal must have experienced significant flows of capital to make possible its rapidly increasing activities, including capital-intensive activities such as the building of new headquarters (pp. 214-218). Perhaps governments, private foundations, and other actors are more important in enabling human rights activism than what comes across in the book?

Furthermore, detailing as many as eleven cases means that it is necessary to take some shortcuts. In many places Becker simply refers to the choices and arguments of "NGOs," without specifying which organizations this includes. Instances of friction or diverging strategic preferences within and among human rights organizations provide very interesting detail in some chapters and could have been discussed at greater length and in more of the cases. In particular, more elaborate and precise descriptions of the internal dynamics and politics of Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International would have made the book more interesting for scholars of human rights. Furthermore, more frequent references and explicit positioning of the author in the text would have increased the value of the book as an authoritative source of information on the specific cases she details.

Taken together, Becker's book represent a striking demonstration of the scale, breath, and intensity of contemporary human rights advocacy. Its detail and clear focus make it a good starting point for undergraduate courses in human rights studies, and it offer examples and insights that will interest most advanced students of human rights and social movements. The main value of this book for scholars lies in the detail of the particular cases and in what these cases demonstrate as a whole with regard to the practices of contemporary human rights advocacy.

Notes

[1]. Paul Gordon Lauren, *Visions Seen: The Evolution of International Human Rights*, 3rd ed.

(Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: A History of Human Rights* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2010); Akira Iriye, Petra Goedde, and William Hitchcock, eds., *The Human Rights Revolution: An International History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[2]. Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 96.

[3]. See for example Beth A. Simmons, *Mobilizing for Human Rights: International Law in Domestic Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo>

Citation: Hanne Hagtvedt Vik. Review of Becker, Jo. *Campaigning for Justice: Human Rights Advocacy in Practice*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. September, 2013.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=38371>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.