



Intersections

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Advocacy is too often reduced to engagement with legislators and other political officials, with a primary focus on those in northern power centers such as Ottawa and, especially, Washington, D.C. To be sure, such engagement is an indispensable part of a multifaceted advocacy approach. Yet we need to conceive of advocacy, and approaches to systemic change, in a broader and more complex manner if we are to acknowledge the dispersed nature of power, including the power exercised by communities in the global south as they organize to address local policies and processes that represent barriers to justice and social change.

This issue of *Intersections* seeks to present a richer understanding of advocacy. We should not think of advocacy simply in terms of political engagement in the global north, but also in terms of: communities in the global south mobilizing to engage local, regional and national government officials in their contexts; solidarity among communities and organizations from the global south; Indigenous groups learning from each other's post-colonial struggles; and more. This broadened understanding of advocacy, we suggest, productively challenges assumptions we often implicitly hold that northern states—especially the United States—are history's primary actors and shifts our focus to the energy and agency within communities in the global south. MCC's partners across the global south often urge MCC to undertake political advocacy in Canada and the United States. Yet these same partners are also typically immersed in communities that are actively mobilizing at the local level to advocate for change.

Before arriving in Colombia in 2012 to start co-facilitating the Seed program, I worked for almost six years with MCC in Guatemala. While there, I worked alongside communities of Indigenous peoples that had found their lives turned upside-down by the intrusion of a massive open pit gold mine within their territory. The Marlin Mine, as it is known, is now owned by the Vancouver-based mining corporation Goldcorp, and is one of the most profitable mines in the world. However, due to the destructive environmental and social impacts on surrounding communities from the mine's activities, Goldcorp has received considerable negative attention from numerous international organizations engaged in advocacy, including faith-based organizations such as MCC.

“ How can we create more flexibility in our advocacy efforts in order to respond to the intuitive, creative and spontaneous acts that surge from affected communities themselves and that are often the watershed moments that force the hand of social change? ”

In March of 2013, as part of an advocacy learning tour from Colombia to Central America, I once again visited these communities that had experienced so much turmoil. Though it was wonderful to reconnect with old friends, it was unsettling to see that despite nearly ten years of advocacy efforts condemning the devastating impact of the Marlin Mine's operations, the prospects of the communities in which my friends lived had only worsened. The numerous documentaries, news stories, awareness raising movements, legislative campaigns, human rights violation reports, technical studies, innumerable masters and doctoral theses and even international sanctions, had not created meaningful change.

In most instances, the lofty goal of international advocacy is to change actual social, policy, and political outcomes. While international advocacy campaigns such as those highlighting the adverse environmental and social impact of the Marlin Mine can count some limited achievements, the cumulative success of such international advocacy is ambiguous at best. As a result, many organizations engaged in advocacy are having new conversations about the nature of their efforts. Faith-based organizations such as MCC are no exception.

Participants in MCC's 2013 advocacy learning tour from Colombia to Central America grappled with questions about the nature of advocacy, including where efforts should be directed and by whom? Where do we envision the locus of change to be? What should the role be of MCC as an agency of Anabaptist churches in Canada and the United States in helping bring about that change? As learning tour participants considered these questions, we identified new questions for MCC to consider:

How can MCC best support the people on whose behalf it advocates? Unfortunately, even when MCC advocacy efforts result in some kind of policy change, the positive impacts are often not experienced—at least directly—by the people and communities whose situations had stimulated the advocacy activity in the first place. To be sure, MCC's partners around the world call on MCC to develop long-term strategies centering on political power centers in the global north, recognizing the roles that countries such as the United States play in various systemic issues. Yet alongside these long-term strategies of political engagement how can we also keep the communities most affected at the center of the advocacy outcomes we seek? How can we better access the immense possibilities of creating pressure from below via short- and medium-term strategies that empower populations, stave off immediate negative impacts and maintain the necessary enthusiasm at the base, while long-term political strategies slowly unfold?

How can MCC maximize the chances of real effectiveness in its advocacy initiatives? An important part of our work is to develop action plans in which progress toward systemic, long-term change is achieved by working on interim outcomes, indicators and concrete activities that assume a certain set of future conditions. Within this planning, however, can we create more flexibility in our advocacy efforts in order to respond to the intuitive, creative and spontaneous acts that surge from affected communities themselves and that are often the watershed moments that force the hand of social change? What would happen if we invested more resources in learning how to comprehend the nature of these decisive moments, rather than in exclusively long-term political strategies or awareness raising campaigns?

Finally, a more philosophical question: how does our conviction (sometimes held implicitly, sometimes stated explicitly) that ultimate power resides in the north hinder or help what we seek via advocacy? How does this conviction reinforce the notion that change trickles down from the top to the bottom? How does this conviction foster passivity and encourage people to wait for others to resolve their problems? How does it blind us to the available power that exists within communities in the global south and the vital movements already underway there?

Advocacy is a phenomenon that continues not only to evolve, but also to grow in importance. Few comprehensive and transformative social changes for the communities that MCC accompanies in the global south come about without some form of organized social movement. Yet these changes typically do not emerge from a single source or cause. Rather, these changes involve the complex interplay of political and public engagement in the global south as well as in the global north. The following essays explore this complex interplay in greater depth. My fellow compilers and I hope that this issue of *Intersections* will in turn spur further conversation within MCC regarding the complexity of advocacy initiatives.

Nate Howard is the co-facilitator for MCC Colombia's Seed program. Nate previously worked for MCC Guatemala for over five years.

Advocacy and systemic change

MCC is at an important juncture, one in which we are called to discern how advocacy and its approaches have changed over the last four decades and how we should think of advocacy moving into the future. In his lead article above, Nate Howard identifies some critical questions about current modes of advocacy from the perspective of local communities. Social change requires the perspectives and participation of local communities to affect systemic change. Developing a more robust understanding of advocacy requires that we understand and define our theories of change, identifying which actions by which actors we believe will lead to long- and short-term change.

While Mennonites in Canada and the U.S. had undertaken advocacy with their governments on an *ad hoc* basis for decades, a decisive chapter in MCC's engagement with government policymakers began in 1968 when the organization opened an office in Washington, D.C. for direct contact with U.S. policymakers after MCC's partners in Vietnam pushed the organization to supplement its humanitarian efforts by addressing systemic causes of poverty and injustice through advocacy to the U.S. government. As the United States was engaged in an escalating war that was devastating Vietnamese communities, MCC realized that decisions by policymakers in Washington had a real impact on people in Vietnam. Limiting one's focus to relief and development, MCC's workers in Vietnam argued, was insufficient. One had to ask about the deeper causes of the devastation faced by Vietnamese communities and then mobilize whatever resources were at one's disposal to address those causes: for MCC in the late 1960s and early 1970s that meant supporting calls to end the United States' military involvement in Vietnam. In subsequent years MCC opened offices in Ottawa to speak to the Canadian government and in New York to engage with the United Nations' members states.



The fall 2010 issue of MCC's *Peace Office Newsletter* (volume 40, number 4) explores different dimensions of advocacy around international mining and resource extraction efforts. Available at http://www.mcc.org/system/files/mcc-pon_10-4.pdf.

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Investing in Conflict: Public Money, Private Gain—Goldcorp in the Americas. Toronto: Rights Action, 2008. Available at: http://www.mimundo.org/pubs_mimundo/Folleto-RA-InvestingConflict-Full.pdf.

“ In highly dynamic advocacy settings it is easy to lose focus of our ultimate goals when we encounter the political realities of legislative compromise.

Over the ensuing decades, endorsing efforts to stop or prevent policies with negative human rights outcomes and promoting policies with potentially positive impact on rights has become an integral part of MCC’s relief, development and peacebuilding activities around the world. Today, MCC’s advocacy work covers a range of issues that align with the organization’s programmatic priorities across the globe. In some contexts the role of advocacy as a tool for change has taken on an increasingly important role. In Haiti, for example, where the United States plays a major role, Haitian partners view MCC advocacy efforts in Washington as an integral part of MCC’s presence in Haiti, and the MCC Haiti program has in turn been structured accordingly. For example, the MCC Haiti program created staff positions to support and resource advocacy efforts connected to Haiti carried out by staff in MCC’s offices in Washington, New York and Ottawa.

In the Palestinian and Israeli contexts, meanwhile, MCC’s civil society partners have strongly underscored that MCC’s relief, development and peacebuilding activities would be irrelevant if not for its advocacy work in Canada and the United States. These Palestinian and Israeli partners view faith-based organizations like MCC as an important bridge to policymakers in countries whose policies significantly hinder the possibilities of a just peace for Palestinians and Israelis alike.

The primary challenge of this approach is that effecting change on a systemic level takes years, even decades, and often the changes that are achieved in government policy are incremental, inadequate for addressing immediate concerns and bound within harsh realities of legislative or political compromises. Advocacy objectives are inevitably obscured and misaligned from those articulated by local communities living within oppressive systems. This dynamic can be understandably frustrating to local communities who desire to see immediate change in their dire situation. As advocacy “success” in the north gets redefined, local communities may feel betrayed. This dynamic raises important questions about the promise and the possible peril of relying on advocacy as the primary tool for effecting short term change as highlighted by Nate Howard’s article—or at least on relying solely upon governmental advocacy in Canada and the United States.

Words such as advocacy or systemic change typically imply a long-term vision. Many of the issues that MCC’s offices in Washington, New York, and Ottawa address through their advocacy efforts have been ongoing concerns for several decades. How do we balance the recognition that systemic economic and political realities that adversely impact local communities will usually only change incrementally over a long timeframe, on the one hand, with the expectations of short-term change on the part of those communities, on the other?

An important starting point is to listen to local communities themselves. Doing so may help us to recognize the agency within these communities and to see that they are not passive observers waiting for so-called systemic change to trickle down. We may then notice that the communities are continually engaged in transformational activities, which may lead us to ask how our partnerships can enhance rather than exploit these local resources.

Second, engaging in a holistic analysis that includes a systems-mapping approach to help advocacy actors and affected communities tease out the best forms of intervention in the short, medium and long-term is crucial. An organization like MCC is best poised to strike a balance in this regard. While MCC programs around the world (including in Canada and the U.S.) can accompany and support communities as they mobilize to address their immediate needs, a deeper analysis can help formulate realistic long-term strategies for systemic change.

Defining our theories of change is vitally important. We should be constantly engaged in a process of asking why and how we believe our interventions will lead to achieving desired policy outcomes. In highly dynamic advocacy settings it is easy to lose focus of our ultimate goals when we encounter the political realities of legislative compromise. If we are able to define how even small and incremental changes will lead to long-term change, then we may be able to better balance local expectations.

Over more than four decades of formalized engagement with policymakers in the U.S. and Canada, political advocacy has become an invaluable tool in MCC's tool box. Such political engagement will remain vital, even as we develop broader understandings of advocacy and evaluate and reshape the efficacy of our approaches to systemic change.

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Reflections on North American Indigenous and Palestinian exchanges

To speak of North America as occupied territory can be quite unnerving for descendants of European colonizers. When Palestinians speak to the occupied status of their lands it often produces a similar reaction on the part of Israeli Jews. What happens when Indigenous nations from Canada and the United States come together with Palestinians to share their historical experiences and contemporary realities of living as colonized peoples with one another? What implications do such conversations have for thinking about advocacy in both long-term and short-term ways and for the role of solidarity between colonized peoples in broader advocacy efforts?

As two Indigenous persons living on the lands now called Canada and the United States who have inherited an ongoing history of colonization, we share here reflections on and an analysis of the complex situation of colonizing occupations in North America and Palestine. Specifically, we will examine what solidarity with Palestinians has come to mean to us as Indigenous people who are also MCC staff working to decolonize our own contexts. Solidarity efforts like these can deepen our understandings of colonial processes, patterns and histories from multiple perspectives and in so doing can assist in developing advocacy strategies that press for the transformative dismantling of colonial structures.



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“ Advocacy efforts related to Palestine-Israel and Indigenous communities in Canada and the United States must both be rooted in critical analysis of colonial histories and ongoing processes of colonization.

For many years MCC has sent North American peacebuilding delegations from Canada and the U.S. to Palestine to learn about the conflict and return home to participate in advocacy for a just peace for Palestinians and Israelis. The ethnic background of these delegations has been primarily non-Indigenous descendants of European settlers. We contend, however, that advocacy efforts should be understood more broadly than solely the mobilizing of constituent groups to participate in efforts to engage policymakers and other political leaders. Specifically, advocacy should be understood to include support for solidarity and mutual learning initiatives among groups facing structurally parallel situations.

Since 1998 MCC has facilitated exchanges between Palestinians and Indigenous persons from different nations within Canada and the United States. These exchanges have included storytelling, relationship building, and walking in the context of each other's experiences of colonization in order to foster radical solidarity. In the beginning these exchanges were primarily designed and promoted by MCC staff of European descent. In more recent years, however, MCC staff of Indigenous descent, European descent MCC and Palestinian partners have all played a part in shaping these visits. As Indigenous persons have begun actively to shape these exchanges, we have brought with us our own stories of colonization. Here are mine (Erica's):

“I grew up living the Indigenous North American experience, on a reservation surrounded by border towns that reminded us where the colonial boundaries were. We could leave the reservation but not without the racism, stereotypes and harassment that would greet us once we left our prisoner of war camp. We were surrounded in all four directions by borders that reminded us that we once freely roamed the Great Plains but now do not.”

One of the principles that assist in maintaining colonization is the concept of “divide and conquer.” If people are strategically divided and controlled and do not know each other's experiences, it is easier to achieve one's goal. As we heard the stories from Palestinians and experienced first-hand their daily interactions with occupation, we began to make connections to our own histories.

For Harley, it was life-altering to witness the dehumanizing forced confinement of Palestinians and relate it to what his relatives experienced in their own confinement during the initiation of the North American Indian Reservation system.

Erica, for her part, relates that “As I journeyed with Palestinians and heard their stories I began to make connections to my own. I found my reality paralleled in their stories and I began to understand why this journey was important to my existence as an Indigenous person. I knew other Indigenous North Americans understood my experience and felt the continual loss of land and a way of life but I didn't know that feeling could extend beyond my context.”

Applying a decolonizing analysis to both the North American Indigenous and Palestine situations is of paramount importance. If we focus our attention only on what we see on the surface it will serve only to instill deep frustration. If we can apply strategies that address root causes then we may see change. We have to see beyond the present and back to the histories of colonization and dispossession that decisively shape both contexts.

Erica explains that “The Americas have been under continual colonization beginning in 1492 and continuing into the present day. As a co-worker has stated, ‘Palestine has been under Israeli Occupation for over 65 years.’ Upon returning to North America I found it difficult to speak of my experiences on the learning exchanges without going into an analysis of colonization and tactics of mass dispossession and cultural erasure (what Palestinians would call the *nakba*, or catastrophe). Not doing so meant that I was only telling half the story. If I spoke from solely about what I saw on the exchanges without contextualizing those experiences within colonial histories, I found I was telling an ending to a story that wasn’t finished. I made people uncomfortable especially when I drew parallels between the Indigenous North American experience and the Palestinian experience.” Participation in these Indigenous North American/Palestinian exchanges reinforced for us the conviction that advocacy efforts related to Palestine-Israel and Indigenous communities in Canada and the United States must both be rooted in critical analysis of colonial histories and ongoing processes of colonization.

Palestinian participants in these exchanges with Indigenous communities in Canada and the United States have sometimes struggled when faced with the often dreadful and depressing poverty and hopelessness that is the outcome of hundreds of years of oppression. One exchange participant questioned, Will this be what is in store for my Palestinian people? However, later this same person saw the resiliency of these Indigenous communities and the strength that comes from a 500 year old struggle for justice. At the same time, when the Idle No More movement swept Canada and the United States to bring attention to Indigenous concerns of harm to the environment that hurts all of humanity, it was reminiscent of the countless marches and demonstrations that Palestinians and their supporters globally have used to build awareness of their plight. There are many things to learn from each other.

Patterns of harm and destruction flowing from legacies of colonialism that shape the present endure both in Palestine-Israel and within Indigenous nations in Canada and the United States. Advocacy efforts that incorporate transformational strategies of decolonization are urgently needed in both contexts. Efforts to bring together Palestinians and Indigenous peoples living in Canada and the United States to undo the dividing tactics that colonization employs and to learn from one another’s histories of survival and struggle are one example of the shape such expanded advocacy efforts can take.

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Erica Littlewolf is Northern Cheyenne from southeastern Montana. She currently lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico and works for MCC Central States as coordinator of the Indigenous Vision Center.



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Advocacy and the church: working for the impossible in Colombia

“Accompanying churches in Colombia as they articulate advocacy visions and strategies for a just peace in the country is exhilaratingly impossible work: joining others as they imagine the world as they would like it to be, and then living as if that imagined world is already here as they work for change.”

In Colombia, MCC has learned that an effective advocacy strategy for peace and social change requires an understanding of the complex interplay of the Colombian church’s witness and identity and the local political and social context. In Colombia MCC’s partners are Mennonite and Mennonite Brethren churches and church-related organizations, and so MCC’s advocacy efforts connected to Colombia are often directly connected to the church. For MCC workers, this shapes our approaches and strategies to advocacy, creating challenges, but also excitement, working alongside partners committed to Christian faith and to the pursuit of a just peace. Bonnie Klassen, Area Director for South America and Mexico, captures this exciting challenge well when she observes that “The most difficult and the most encouraging part of working with Mennonite Central Committee and our partners here in Colombia is that we are always trying to do the impossible.”

When it comes to advocacy, churches and church-based organizations are able to act in a unique way because their standpoints are based on theology as opposed to ideology. While theologically-shaped faith commitments can and do shape and inform political positions, we have found that the political advocacy positions emerging from the Colombian Mennonite church context have a qualitatively different feel than other forms of political advocacy: the fundamental agenda is the transformation of social situations based on biblical beliefs, not partisan allegiances. Colombian Mennonite churches seek to understand root causes and to work in a nonviolent way to bring about social change which is not rooted in the political power plays that are the norm in Colombia. This stance gives the Colombian Mennonite churches a unique voice in the country’s polarized political climate.

In Colombia, the work of MCC is directed by an advisory committee consisting of MCC, church leaders of the three different Mennonite denominations in Colombia and members of various church-based partner organizations. MCC Colombia’s mission is to support the work of the church in all areas, including advocacy.

The churches are engaged in a number of advocacy initiatives directed locally within Colombia and internationally. Frequent visiting delegations from Canada and the United States arrive to deepen their understanding of the connections between the north and the south. A Prophetic Call, an investigative report on the impact of armed conflict published by Colombian partner *Justapaz*, is a powerful action-inviting resource directed toward the Colombian government and internationally. *Pan y Paz* (Bread and Peace) is an annual public demonstration of the Colombia Mennonite churches expressing their desire for peace with social justice and their call for all parties within Colombia to work toward such peace. *Days of Prayer and Action for Colombia* encourage Anabaptist churches in Canada and the United States to pray and act for change alongside the actions taken by Colombians in their own country.

Despite these significant activities, progress toward the desired change directed by the church often seems slow, perhaps due to a divide that often exists between advocacy activities and the participation of lay church members. Those in church leadership or active in church-related

organizations have a different concept of advocacy than lay members of congregations who attend worship services but who are not involved in direct decision-making processes. It is tempting for those of us from outside the Colombian context to dream of instantly creating socially-aware and engaged congregations who will then create rapid change within Colombia. Yet such dreams derive from a lack of understanding and engagement with local contexts and histories. Working in partnership challenges MCC to look beneath the surface and to join church and church-related partners in asking how advocacy initiatives address the expressed needs and visions of local congregations and communities. Advocacy with the church starts by examining why people are part of the church. Not everyone participates in church to work on social projects but rather to engage in worship and fellowship. Does a new focus on advocacy threaten those needs or help them? Programs must be structured in such a way that people choose to participate as an expression of their faith and identity as church members, not as pressure to perform politically. This approach allows for long-term participation and commitment in the midst of a changing context.

Partnership also recognizes that advocacy in this context can be dangerous. Numerous human rights defenders are killed every year in Colombia; lives are put on the line by demanding social justice in a way that they are not in Canada or the United States. As outsiders living in Colombia, we must grapple with that simple fact and allow ourselves to be directed by partners, who have much more insight and experience than we hold. If MCC workers rush in the press for change, we face the risk of forgetting where we are working and why. It is therefore vital that MCC workers be directed by Colombian partners in our work as a check on latent neo-colonialist impulses to impose our own agendas without understanding the agendas of those with whom we work.

Social change may appear easy and fast at desks far removed from the reality of local communities facing varied forms of social, political and economic injustice. Advocacy emerging from local church contexts involves the work of forming a vision of advocacy, of recognizing community needs and of working to develop and enrich a theology that embraces social justice, with all its inherent risks. For MCC as an organization of Anabaptist churches in Canada and the United States, its role in developing and supporting such advocacy efforts must be one of being accountable to the churches in that context. Accompanying churches in Colombia as they articulate advocacy visions and strategies for a just peace in the country is exhilaratingly impossible work: joining others as they imagine the world as they would like it to be, and then living as if that imagined world is already here as they work for change. Accompanying churches engaged in advocacy may often seem impossible, but it also brings with it the beauty of a patient sticking with relationships as we support Colombian Mennonite churches, day by day and step by step, as they advocate for a just and peaceful future for their communities and their country.

Anna Vogt works with MCC Colombia partner Justapaz in Bogota. She is from Dawson, Yukon, Canada.



Days of Prayer and Action
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Advocacy terminologies from the ground up

“ A richer understanding of advocacy will decenter the role played by northern actors and will insist on the key importance of engaging the voices and actions of mobilized communities in the global south.

There are multiple terminologies for the geography of advocacy: the west and the rest, core and periphery, developed and underdeveloped, third and first world, the global north and south, modern and developing, mainstream and alternative. All divide the world into simple binaries, suggesting that every context must fit into either of the two categories, and that one is the ideal while the other should strive to be like the ideal. This division narrows the wide diversity of political organization into only two options, and gives agency and power to the ideal group, while making the other group depend on the powerful to define their options. MCC partner organizations in Colombia, Guatemala and Mexico challenge this dualistic language, particularly the global “north” and “south” labels, claiming and insisting on space for agency and advocacy at all levels and in all contexts. In his discussion of the concept of the global north and south, Boaventura de Sousa Santos explains that “south” and “north” should not be thought of in exclusively geographical terms but rather as representations of the imperial, capitalist, colonial status quo (north) and the subjected peoples who are marginalized by and resist colonial systems, no matter their geographic location (south) (Santos 51). This definition recognizes the changing nature of population and power across borders, resists naming the north as the ideal, and acknowledges that the global south challenges the northern, colonial model. To the extent, however, that the terminology of “north” and “south” implies that all power resides in the north, with the south understood as powerless, it threatens to yield a distorted and limited understanding of advocacy as directed solely to the governments of the north. A richer understanding of advocacy will decenter the role played by northern actors and will insist on the key importance of engaging the voices and actions of mobilized communities in the global south.

MCC Colombia partners work in communities that could be unthinkingly lumped into the demeaning categories of powerless, suffering, poor and underdeveloped—the opposite of the powerful, oppressor, rich and developed world. Yet such categories do not do justice to these communities’ self-understanding: farmers newly returned to their land following displacement by the armed conflict consider themselves wealthy because of their crops, families, animals, clean air and water, and consider city-dwellers poor, because despite having money, they have nowhere to grow food.

As Robert J. C. Young observes, “for contemporary social problems and movements, the politics are often in the articulation” (73). The process of a community or social movement defining its own goals, experiences and history is a transformative step that significantly shapes how it will act and advocate. The community of Salquil, in the indigenous Ixil region of Guatemala, successfully rejected the establishment of a barite mine on their communal grazing land through a process of community consultation and mobilization. The Indigenous Council (Alcaldia Indígena), the community decision making body, explained their desire to first hear what external NGOs, government programs, and visitors propose, and then dialogue and determine the compatibility of different proposals with their community goals. Pablo Zeta of FUNDAMAYA, a civil society organization in Guatemala that supports local Indigenous communities as they organize, expressed the same need for balance and dialogue. These communities do not blindly reject all ideas from outside, but rather to insist on testing

proposed “ideal” approaches against their histories and contexts. At a dialogue hosted the Center of Ecumenical Studies in Mexico City, a pastor explained one of the dilemmas facing the town of Zapateca, Mexico. The community used to grow its own beans and corn, but under the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the majority of the town now eats tortillas made with transgenic corn imported from the United States. For this pastor and others in Zapateca, the words “developed” and “underdeveloped” are called into question as a town substitutes its farming culture for factories and is no longer able to feed itself.

Postcolonial social movements gain power through self-definition. As de Sousa Santos notes, they develop their own terminology of territory, dignity, autonomy and resistance (Santos 48). The terms may be shared from movement to movement, but definition happens from the ground up. Organizations like MCC must listen to partner communities as they voice their way of seeing the world in all of its complex particularities. By its very nature, the struggle of language and definition is a struggle for power, and self-definition is an empowering act, which sets up conditions for communities undertaking such self-definition to encounter outside groups on more equal footing. Young states that “most productive forms of thought [are] those that interact freely across disciplines and cultures in constructive dialogues that undo the hierarchies of power” (114). Open dialogue generates connections, which challenge and reveal the intersections of diverse worldviews. For MCC to do advocacy well, it must be attentive to how the aspirations and self-definitions of the communities MCC accompanies can often be ignored or devalued by deficit understandings of the realities of power and instead must commit itself to supporting those communities as they advocate in their contexts.

Larisa Zehr works with MCC partner organization Sembrandopaz on Colombia’s Caribbean coast.

Building bridges of solidarity in DR Congo

In a country as large as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo), geographic distances, as well as linguistic and ethnic differences, are factors that prevent people from knowing each other well. This is true even among the Mennonite churches of DR Congo. Within such a context meetings, visits and exchanges designed to build bridges of familiarity among Congolese Mennonite churches and between different regions of the country help lay the groundwork for stronger relationships among Congolese Mennonite churches. Hopefully, such experiences will also promote a desire to better understand and relate to issues in the surrounding society.

The Menno-Monde project has begun building these bridges of solidarity, providing Congolese Mennonite young adults a significant introduction to new people and places. Participation in exchanges among youth from different regions in the DR Congo helps to expand horizons and awareness. Over time, Congolese Mennonite leaders hope that the Menno-Monde initiative will foster stronger church and service commitments among young Congolese Mennonites, in turn strengthening ties and building solidarity between Mennonites from different language groups and regions, while encouraging a compassionate engagement with the broader Congolese society.



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Visits and exchanges designed to build bridges of familiarity among Congolese Mennonite churches and between different regions of the country help lay the groundwork for stronger relationships among Congolese Mennonite churches.

“I didn’t know there were other groups of Mennonites in our country, and even in our city.” “I thought we weren’t supposed to like Mennonites from the other (conference) groups.” “I was really scared to go to another town and stay with a family I didn’t know, but it was great. They eat the same food we do.”

These comments are typical of reactions shared by young adult Mennonites in DR Congo who have participated in the Menno-Monde project. Started in 2011 as the brainchild of the MCC DR Congo advisory committee, Menno-Monde provides exchange experiences for young Mennonites ages 15 to 25. Participants spend two weeks with a family from a Mennonite conference group different than their own, usually in a location quite far from their own homes.

DR Congo is an enormous country, and Mennonites are spread out over much of the western and central region. An estimated 200,000 Mennonites live in DR Congo, divided into three conference groups which emerged from North American Mennonite mission efforts over the past 100 years: the Mennonite Brethren Church of Congo (CEFMC), the Mennonite Church of Congo (CMCO), and the Evangelical Mennonite Church (CEM). Limited interaction and ethnic differences have led to minimal opportunities for communication or unity among the three groups. Mennonites speak several different languages and not all speak French. Communication among congregations is stymied by distance and poor communication tools.

The Menno-Monde (*monde* means “world” in French) project offers an opportunity for youth groups and their congregations to plan and implement short-term exchanges themselves. They receive guidance from the MCC Menno-Monde coordinator, who visits all participating congregations and individuals, explains the project to pastors and youth leaders and encourages all involved to make exchange visits a time of rich sharing and service.

Orientation materials are simple and the guidelines are clear. Responsibilities for being a participant, a sending congregation and a host congregation are carefully presented. Pastors are encouraged to allow youth groups to choose their participant and to be actively involved in helping the participant get ready to visit a church in another location. Orientation materials also provide information about what Anabaptism means, what the Mennonite church confesses and the value of service. Each participant writes a report upon return. For many, music is a highlight of the exchange experience, as participants typically sing in choirs in the church they visit. One young man was thrilled that he learned to play a traditional drum. A young woman was pleased that she was able to lead a Bible study by herself. One host parent reported: “The young man who visited us did not know how to pray in church, but we taught him.” At another location, the Menno-Monde participant helped the youth group carry bricks for a church building project.

Since December 2011, 49 young adults from approximately 30 Mennonite congregations have participated in Menno-Monde exchanges. Initially, all exchanges were between the cities of Kinshasa and Kikwit. Over time, Bandundu Ville was added to the list of locations. The December 2013 exchange, in which 16 young people participated, included exchanges between Kikwit and the smaller, remote village of Gungu in Bandundu Province.

In the year ahead, Menno-Monde will be finding ways to introduce Menno-Monde to Mennonite churches farther from the capital. In Western Kasai province, for example, the headquarters of the CMCO conference are in Tshikapa. When consulted about how to develop Menno-Monde connections in that region, local church leaders suggested that exchanges take place among outlying congregations whose members are from different ethnic groups. In many cases these differences impede friendship and cooperation among congregations. Creative exchanges may allow youth to develop good relationships and to interact in ways that heal old rifts and suspicions.

A youth exchange provides growth and adventure and builds solidarity for all involved. In the words of one Congolese Mennonite high school student after her Menno-Monde exchange experience, “Menno-Monde opened my eyes. I had never before been outside the city of Kinshasa. The beauty of the village where I stayed, and the love of my host family, made me want to know more about my country and my church.”

Suzanne Lind and her husband Tim are the MCC representatives in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Their home base is in Three Rivers, Michigan.

Mining and the struggle for life in Guatemala and Colombia

The mining industry is prevalent throughout Latin America, taking on different forms and in many instances bringing with it adverse consequences for people’s lives and the environment. Advocacy responses by local populations to mining initiatives vary significantly, with local Indigenous populations from western Guatemala taking a very different approach than Chocoanos in Colombia in mobilizing to face the challenges presented by mining to their communities. While approaches may differ, the challenges mining presents in both contexts are similar. Accordingly, south-to-south learning exchanges between such communities confronting the devastation of mining operations can and should be an important part of advocacy efforts related to mining, with the exchanges offering opportunities for people from different circumstances facing similar challenges to learn from one another and thus to support each other in solidarity.

San Marcos is a department located in the southwestern mountains of Guatemala with fertile lands and a long history of agriculture. Approximately 36% of its inhabitants are Indigenous descendants of the Maya, which accounts for their close and unique relationship with nature. In recent decades communities across Latin America like the San Marcos region have become targets for the open-pit mining activities of multinational corporations—in San Marcos’ case, the Marlin Mine in San Miguel Ixathuacan. San Marcos stands as an emblematic case in which the mining operation of a multinational corporation has led to the displacement of several communities, social rupture, contamination of the soil and water sources and health problems.

With the help of the San Marcos diocese, other communities in the department have begun preparing themselves for the imminent incursion of mining companies. In a form of local advocacy, community activists have organized to raise awareness of future consequences of mining



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“ Today, some of the most powerful forces shaping our world are corporations that operate in a highly unregulated free-market context that transcends the nation-state. One of the challenges for organizations like MCC will be how to engage such corporations in its advocacy efforts.

activities, highlighting the negative impact of the Marlin Mine. As a result of this local mobilization, several communities in the San Marcos department, such as Sibinal, have voted internally against the presence of similar mines in their territories.

Community-based social movements also work to strengthen the relationship between San Marcos' people and creation, including organizing projects for training community members in ecotourism and agriculture. This form of advocacy empowers communities by underscoring their essential relationship with land. Fostering such awareness makes it much more difficult for mining companies to “divide and conquer.”

Mining is also a pressing issues facing Chocó, one of the rainiest and most bio-diverse parts of Colombia and the world. Mining activities in the area date back to the time of the Spanish conquest, when slaves were the main labor force. Choco's inhabitants are, for the most part, of African descent. Unlike the Indigenous people of San Marcos, the relationship between the Chocoano people and their land is based on the extraction of natural resources. After Colombia gained independence from Spain, many of the department's former slaves continued to practice artisanal mining, without renewing their bond with nature. Then, during the second half of the twentieth century, miners began using new technologies for the extraction of precious metals, which led to the use of suction diggers and back hoes, allowing miners greater access to the rivers.

Many water sources in Chocó have become contaminated due to the use of mercury in mining operations to “trap” gold and platinum particles. Dredges and backhoes destroy fertile layers of soil, turning them into stone hills on which farming is practically impossible and contributing to the sedimentation of rivers, making navigation difficult and increasing flood risks. The Colombian state has granted numerous mining concessions within Chocó to multinational companies for exploration and exploitation. Community activists in Chocó fear the magnitude of future environmental devastation to the department if communities do not organize themselves soon to address encroaching mining activities in the region.

For many Chocoanos, mining is the only way of life they have ever known, and thanks to it families have managed to build homes and pay for their children's studies. Chocoanos are thus not dogmatically opposed to mining. Yet increasingly over the past few years small- and medium-scale miners have protested against the state repression of illegal and informal mining activities in favor of mining megaprojects, often carried out by multinational corporations.

Alternatives to mining are still being developed in Chocó. The Catholic and Mennonite Brethren churches have organized efforts to encourage livelihoods other than mining, especially farming. Programs developed by these churches promote the growth of local food crops (plantain, papaya, pineapple, borojó, rice, cacao), the use of chicken coops and fish ponds, and the production of handicrafts using recycled and native materials like seed and bark. For now production from these initiatives can only supply local demand and are unable to compete with the temporary income that multinationals may have to offer.

Much work remains to be done to raise awareness about the devastating effects of mining and to foster a renewed perception of the earth as a source of life, not simply of income. Developing strong advocacy efforts in San Marcos and Chocó will require building solid bonds among community members and understanding the power that lies within unity. As faith-based organizations like MCC accompany and support these communities in their local advocacy efforts, they should seriously consider organizing exchanges between leaders from the two communities facing similar challenges, both to nurture solidarity and to learn from one another.

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Advocacy lessons from MCC's work in Latin America

While I was the MCC Policy Analyst and Educator for MCC Latin America (2010-2013), I had the privilege of working with many different people throughout the Americas on a diversity of advocacy issues. The experience taught me many things about authentic and effective advocacy work, but it also raised some questions:

Advocacy in a church-based organization is different: When I started my position I had all kinds of dramatic ideas about organizing and coordinating massive international mobilizing campaigns such as those carried out by groups like Oxfam or Amnesty International. However, I soon discovered that it doesn't work that way in MCC. While individuals support independent organizations like Oxfam and Amnesty because they agree with the objectives of the organization, MCC supporters are typically (albeit not exclusively) marked by church affiliation rather than by agreement on particular social issues. Given the wide range of theological, political and other perspectives among MCC's supporters, it is a challenge to formulate advocacy campaigns in a church organization that resonate with a wide swath of MCC's constituency. Oddly enough, this challenge is also the greatest strength of church-based organizations. When MCC finally does make a statement or support a petition, authorities listen because they cannot just dismiss the opinion as "radical activists" with a "marginal agenda." Rather, church-based statements are recognized as representative of a broad spectrum of the public opinion. MCC has been able to add its weight in this way to various calls for change, such as signing a petition with hundreds of faith groups for a better Arms Trade Treaty at the UN in 2012.

Advocacy is strongest when grounded in experience: Advocacy arising from our direct encounters has greater validity and credibility. It also enables MCC to be a megaphone for voices from population groups that are often marginalized in the larger policy decision-making processes that impact their lives. For example, many of the immigrant rights organizations in the United States do not have direct international links. MCC is one of the few organizations with partners in sending communities, in locations along migrant transit routes and in destination countries. These global grassroots connections enable MCC to build bridges between micro-level experience and activism in Latin America and



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the United States, on the one hand, and macro-level policy initiatives for immigration reform in the United States, on the other.

Advocacy priorities depend on your location: One of the challenges of my position was facilitating the connections between Canada and the United States (as centers of financial and military power and home to the majority of MCC supporters) and Latin America (location of many global inequities and conflict, as well as MCC work). It sometimes proved difficult to find a common agenda for both our North American constituency and our Latin American partners. For example, urban violence is a high priority for communities and churches in Latin America, while mining is a concern in Canada and some Latin American communities, and immigration is critical in the United States and some Latin American communities. Clearly there are connections and intersections. How do we work together as international partners to support each other's agendas, even though priorities and pressures may differ? How do we persuade Anabaptists in Canada and the United States to engage on issues that are not directly related to them but to which they have power to contribute to positive change?

Advocacy is more than speaking to government: In the contemporary globalized economic context, the new most powerful actors in the world are multi-national corporations. Traditionally, advocacy was "speaking truth to power," with the "power" understood as government. Today, some of the most powerful forces shaping our world are corporations that operate in a highly unregulated free-market context that transcends the nation-state. Transnational extractive industries are an example of this dynamic. In communities where MCC works, community-led advocacy is increasingly directed at the corporations themselves. One of the challenges going forward will be to determine MCC's institutional advocacy objectives regarding economic development based on large-scale resource extraction and the role of engaging corporations within those objectives. Is it more pragmatic to work with corporations to prevent the worst abuses and increase the benefits to local communities as much as possible? And who makes such decisions about advocacy objectives and strategies?

Advocacy has become globalized: Historically, advocacy has often involved concerned "First World" citizens speaking to their governments about injustice, poverty, and violence in the so-called "Third World." However, with globalization, including digital communications and increased international travel, advocacy has become more issue-focused, with alliances and collaborations occurring across international and social boundaries as cross-sector groups form around common causes. A vivid example of this is mining activism: MCC has facilitated links among communities affected by mining in Guatemala, Colombia, Haiti and Mexico, as well as Indigenous communities in Canada and rural communities in Appalachia. These global networks not only strengthen social change movements, they can also contribute to a process of correcting the imbalances of conventional economic, social and political power.

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