

Solidarity Actions: The letter writing campaign

There are different forms of public participation. In addition to demonstrations and rallies, there are other efficient tools to demand change, such as poster and postcard campaigns, calls for action campaigns, petitions and direct lobbying. This **WLUML Tool for Activists** focuses on just one form of public participation: the letter writing campaign or solidarity letter.

Why write?

Your letter, together with others from all over the world, can lead to a dramatic improvement in the situation of a victim of a human rights abuse. Receiving a flood of mail can greatly impact the way a legislator votes on a particular issue.

Letter campaigns can potentially mobilise huge numbers of people. They are also crucial in bringing urgent matters to the attention of a larger audience who can then learn how to act upon injustices and human rights abuses. In short, the letter writing campaign serves to raise public awareness and to educate the international community about an issue. Letter-writing is particularly effective at the global level and enables those who can't participate in rallies and meetings due to geographical or time constraints to express their views.

The ultimate goal of social activism is to enable people to exercise choice, not to impose participation, regardless of how well-justified one may think such involvement is. Solidarity letters campaigns are particularly effective in countries where the government is concerned with its image and popularity on the international stage. Those governments that make a public show of their disdain for international opinion, such as Mugabe's Zimbabwe or the current Burmese military regime, are unlikely to react positively. Nevertheless, flooding their mail boxes with letters will make an impression, even if it is simply to remind them that authorities around the world can no longer perpetrate crimes in secret, and they are not operating in a vacuum, within which international law does not apply: the world IS watching and there WILL be consequences.

Key issues and Guidelines

Whilst there is no universal recipe for effective solidarity action, here are some points to bear in mind:

a) **Set up your goals, know your 'enemies' and ensure local support**

It is important to clearly identify the problems and to prioritise them, setting out your objectives (change in policy/law, practice, behaviour or program) and taking into consideration who will benefit and who will lose; try to assess which cases warrant a letter campaign and whether in some cases such a campaign could be counterproductive, provoking a backlash as a result of raising awareness on a sensitive/controversial issue, at the wrong time and/or without local support. That said, do not be afraid of making 'enemies' amongst those who are guilty of abuses, just take care not to alienate those you are in solidarity with.

What processes or actions do you wish to set in motion? What is it, precisely, that you expect supporters and sympathisers to do? A letter campaign must explain why you feel they should take action for or against that issue and this must be stated in very clear language so that readers know exactly what is requested from them.

Sometimes it is more useful to resort to different, or complementary, campaigns such as an education campaign addressing not just high officials but other influential figures closer to the grassroots level. For instance, [Ain O Salish Kendra \(ASK\)](#), an NGO working to improve access to and understanding of the legal/justice system in Bangladesh, works with rural leaders to prevent unfair trials on women by village councils in addition to sending out petitions and bringing about awareness through letter-writing campaigns.

b) **Fact-finding/Research**

Get detailed background on the particular topic and double-check its accuracy. Misinformation could seriously prejudice your cause. Provide a short fact-sheet written in clear, simple and accessible language, particularly if you are appealing for international support, including a summary of the details of the case. People are not necessarily familiar with the context or

details of a particular situation. Finally, provide the sources of your information where possible and when it does not endanger the source.

c) **Content**

Decide whether to write a sample letter for your readers to copy and paste and simply sign before sending directly to the authorities, OR whether to ask them to compose their own solidarity letters based on the facts you provide, leaving it to sympathisers to express their concerns in their own language. In anticipation of the latter option, you could also provide some tips for your readers; should they decide to personalize the letter, encourage them to identify themselves and to say a little about their occupation or background to show that all kinds of people are concerned about human rights. Finally, specify whether supporters should circulate the petition among other groups and organizations with whom they might have contact.

Whether you are providing a sample letter or not you must write up not only a summary of the situation, based on facts, and some background context, but a list of the relevant authorities to be contacted. You could also install a program whereby supporters can add their details to a few information fields online and simply click send and emails will be automatically generated. See <http://www.citizenspeak.org/> for details on a free email advocacy service that automatically generates and hosts a unique web page for your campaign.

Last, but not least, make it fun! Be creative! If you want to get as many people as possible to sign your petition/write a letter, try to introduce some elements that draw their attention, possibly by using humour.

d) **Timing**

Is your action part of a larger project or does it respond to a critical and urgent situation? Is your timing opportune?

Keeping a sharp eye on what's going on in the world is a cumbersome task that can, nonetheless, reinforcing your efforts. A particular case that highlights the importance and relevance of a broader, long-term issue might be difficult to spot but is definitely worth your

time. Occasionally forces combine to provide moments for concerted efforts towards social change. For example, Moroccan women launched their 'One Million Signatures' campaign to reform Moroccan personal status law as their government claimed a new liberal and democratic image on the international stage.

Write *before* decisions are made and action is taken. But don't write too long beforehand; a letter six months before a vote will probably be forgotten.

e) **Target**

What key figures have a say, influence or formulate policies regarding your topic of interest? What office/official (MP, for instance), government body, institution, public personality or lawmaker should you be addressing? Should you go local or global, or both?

Also, bear in mind there are diverse forces in society that might affect your campaign and that they are not always comprised within the State or an international body, they could be market agents or civil society bodies. Similarly, officials to be addressed might not be the same for all your readers/supporters. Should each citizen be approaching their own Government officials to lobby the target of the solidarity action on your behalf? Or would it be more effective to flood the target's office with solidarity/protest letters from supporters worldwide?

Once you decide, spell their names correctly and identify their titles and positions.

f) **Style of the actual letter**

- Letters don't have to be long or detailed; they should be brief, factual and polite.
- Write in a natural style. Do not feel you have to use formal or elaborate phrases. Straightforward, polite wording is always acceptable.
- If you use abbreviations or acronyms, make sure to write them out in full at least once before using the short form.
- Don't discuss ideology or politics; focus on human rights violations, not governments or political systems.
- Take special care not to sound aggressive or offensive. Don't plead, and never threaten or

insult. You want to win a friend, if not now, then on other issues in the future.

- Be positive and constructive - make a clear request and write as if the reader is open to reasoned argument. Use a conclusion that encourages a reply.
- Printed or digital? Some organizations gather hundreds of thousands of signatures within days due to the extended use of technologies like Internet; however, when our audience, those meant to take part in our campaign, do not enjoy the use of a computer, let alone Internet, paper and ink are the most readily available resources.

g) **Follow-up**

Was your letter answered? Write back to thank your legislators when they take an action you agree with; if a staff member is particularly helpful, thank him or her, or mention your gratitude in your letter to a legislator. Unanswered? Keep writing!

Whatever the outcome, update all those who wrote letters as a case evolves. Whenever possible, send a congratulatory note to the participants when a mobilisation has been successful.

It is also essential for social solidarity activists to build a bank of names and addresses of supportive individuals and organizations, and to file information which will help identify potential supporters for relevant cases.

h) **Monitor**

To be able to monitor the outcome of the letter writing campaign you need to have clearly set out your goals beforehand. Was your campaign aimed at achieving international awareness, at getting an issue on the agenda or at real change on the ground? Has it worked? Don't forget campaigns are not linear, they might progress fast at some point and slow at other; they might even stall and reverse.

Security issues

Some circumstances require great concern for the safety of the victim of an injustice or abuse. When a request for letters of support is circulated, it is very important to specify whether supporters should mention the name of the person or organisation that requested the Call for Action. In some cases, identifying individuals or organisations may threaten their security.

Appendix: *Two years too long - release Binayak Sen!*

http://www.amnesty.org.uk/actions_details.asp?ActionID=398

Dear (recipient),

I write to bring your urgent attention to the case of Dr Binayak Sen who, on 14th May, is about to start his third year in prison.

The continued incarceration of prisoner of conscience Dr Binayak Sen is a grave injustice. The charges and evidence against him appear to be baseless and politically-motivated, designed to silence his important human rights work: proper charges were not filed until 7 months after his initial arrest and during this time he was denied bail and kept in solitary confinement for 3 weeks. Legal proceedings have been protracted, and there has still been no conclusion to his trial, which has been repeatedly delayed. Throughout Dr Sen has had to remain in prison. Worryingly he is also suffering from a health condition for which he needs specialist treatment.

Dr Sen is a champion of the poor and marginalized, and his pioneering work on health and human rights work has been recognised globally. The work of human rights defenders like Dr Sen, who peacefully exercise their right to freedom of expression and carry out legitimate and valuable work should be respected and supported.

On the second anniversary of Dr Sen's arrest I am calling on your government to:

- *Release Dr Sen immediately and without conditions*
- *Ensure that Dr Sen is provided with specialist medical treatment of his choosing while he remains in custody.*
- *Ensure that the trials of at least 50 others who are also currently detained under various security laws in Chhattisgarh state are brought to a swift and just conclusion in accordance with international standards of fair trial.*

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