

INFLUENCING GOVERNANCE FROM THE OUTSIDE: EXPERIENCE FROM CHANGE.ORG

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INTRODUCTION: ABOUT CHANGE.ORG

Over the last two years, Change.org has become the world's leading platform for everyday social change. Change.org is an open platform, similar in many ways to YouTube or Twitter. But unlike them, we are a social venture driven by a civil society mission: empowering people everywhere to create the change they want to see.

We provide cutting-edge tools and know-how, equipping citizens, communities and organisations to run and win their own campaigns and to build networked movements. It seems to be working. Since the start of 2012, our user base has grown more than tenfold – from 6 million to more than 65 million people all over the world.¹

People on Change.org do more than participate. Increasingly, they're having real

world impact. Tens of millions of citizens have already experienced victory on Change.org, and countless more have influenced a public debate or secured engagement and dialogue with decision-makers.

Change.org operates at the intersection of two great trends. Technology is connecting us like never before, accelerating and diversifying the opportunities for communication and social action. Just as importantly, social attitudes, relationships and modes of organisation are in flux. Citizens' expectations of decision-makers and institutions are growing. Top-down power and business as usual are losing legitimacy, and the narrative of individual empowerment is growing.

To illustrate the potential of networked change, I begin by sharing just a few stories of the thousands of Change.org campaigns that have significantly influenced governance from the outside, while highlighting some of their success factors. I close by explaining how we at Change.org think these new forms of empowerment and collective action are starting to change the rules of the game and sketching some of the swarming possibilities the future might hold.

SUCCESS STORIES IN NETWORKED CHANGE

One of the most powerful Change.org stories in Indonesia took place in 2012, around

allegations of corruption by Inspector General Djoko Susilo, head of the national police training academy and previously head of the traffic police.

Investigators from the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) sought to question police officers about the allegations, but were thrown in a jail cell instead for their trouble.

Immediately, a civic alliance including anti-corruption campaigners, former public officials and prominent public figures mobilised in response, with a petition on Change.org at the hub of their efforts.²

Over the following weeks, a dramatic confrontation developed between the two public institutions of the KPK and the police. Accountability for the security forces has been a long-standing challenge in Indonesia, and these events came amidst an escalating pattern of disrespect for the anti-corruption commission. Parliamentarians had been threatening to undermine its powers and refused for years to approve funding for its new headquarters – an issue which itself had already been the subject of a Change.org petition.

Under other circumstances, the file on Djoko Susilo might simply have been added to a long list of unresolved corruption cases, feeding a generalised sense of pessimism among the Indonesian public that things would never

change. But the campaign on Change.org spread through social media and provided a rallying point for citizens.

The face-off grew into a national crisis, with neither side ready to back down. President Yudhoyono remained worryingly silent. The campaigners became nicknamed the “Fire Ants” movement, both because of their chosen colours and because they were swarming so fiercely.

The climax came when the police marched on the anti-corruption commission’s headquarters to arrest their principal investigator on trumped-up charges, but were turned back by a human chain of citizens, hurriedly organised by the alliance via the Change.org platform and other social media.

The media coverage became intense. President Yudhoyono was challenged to intervene personally. Finally, he went on television to speak for two hours to the nation. He backed the anti-corruption cause and ordered the police and others to cooperate.

Within days, parliament had also taken steps to release funding for the KPK. A year later, Djoko Susilo was found guilty of massive graft and sentenced to 10 years in prison, his illegally gotten assets exposed and seized.

The struggle against corruption in Indonesia goes on, with many new campaigns to

fight, and many advances and reverses. But many think this was a turning point in that struggle – reinforcing the public’s support for anti-corruption institutions, as well as citizens’ hope and belief that their actions could make a difference, and that they could see misdeeds punished.

Change.org in Argentina has also seen a growing wave of campaigns around issues of good governance, corruption and civic voice. But one of the most remarkable and high-impact victories there came around an issue of daily life, of families, care and health.

In Argentina, well over four million people – around 1 in 10 – now have diabetes. But the law providing for these patients’ care was more than 20 years old and left millions without medicines or treatment. So in August 2013, N.A.Dia, an association of parents of children with diabetes from all over Argentina, started campaigning on Change.org for a new diabetes law.³

Constanza, a mother of a child with diabetes, started the first petition to place the idea of a new diabetes law on the public agenda, with the story of her and her son front and centre. They raised 30,000 signatures and then went to knock on the doors of every member of the Senate Health Commission, converting them individually and working closely with some of them to start drafting a new law.

Next, to create momentum in the legislative process, N.A.Dia started a second petition, asking the Senate as a whole to discuss and agree to this law. They delivered the petition to senators and organised a telephone call-in action, gaining media coverage. In November 2013, their proposed Diabetes Law was approved unanimously by the Senate.

Finally, a third Change.org petition was started – this time urging the Congress to confirm the law before its session ended two weeks later. Again, families and patients actively engaged with their representatives, and again the bill was approved unanimously, just four months after the whole campaign had begun. The scale and speed of this impact was remarkable, in a context where diabetes had been a subject of political controversy earlier in the year – and it inspired a wave of further campaigns in Argentina, on health and other issues.

These two cases illustrate some of the common attributes and success factors of campaigns on Change.org, many of which will be familiar from other social change contexts. Winnable goals and asks which are targeted to relevant decision-makers are naturally very important. Specific victories help to inspire and engage many more people, giving them a sense of momentum and efficacy.

The more broadly appealing a campaign, the more likely it is to secure large-scale support.

This is partly about objective logic and evidence. But compelling storytelling, appealing protagonists and emotional content are critical to building momentum and spreading campaigns and narratives through media and social media, in a way that more traditional civil society institutions sometimes seem to have forgotten.

As an open platform with a huge, fast-growing user base and a simple, universal and democratic mission of empowerment, Change.org provides a uniquely powerful channel for accessing not only publics, but also media and decision-makers, who experience it as a direct, authentic and increasingly powerful channel for public opinion.

Thailand has proven remarkably fertile ground for citizens and organisations to achieve impact through Change.org. For example, the small schools network had been campaigning for the education ministry to involve communities in decision-making processes for almost three years with no success. But it was a petition on Change.org – started by Mr Chatchawan and other rural teachers – that achieved their first breakthrough.⁴

The petition came in response to a sudden proposal from the Education Minister to close almost 6,000 small rural schools, which support not only children's education but also the local communities by having teachers embedded in the community and education

nearby. The campaign went viral on social media and helped bridge the urban-rural divide and engage Thailand's middle classes.

Within five days, the campaign was getting daily front-page coverage and the Education Minister agreed to meet with the petition starters. He set up a joint committee on the issue and agreed that local communities should be involved in making all such decisions and that no school would be closed against the wishes of the local community.

The community campaign against the Mae Wong Dam in Thailand also gathered much of its momentum through a 120,000 signature petition on Change.org, which helped to demonstrate broad social support and reinforced more traditional marches and lobbying. Rural fishing communities used similar methods to prevent the Fisheries Department from classifying illegal trawlers as legitimate, thereby protecting their livelihoods and marine habitats.

The biggest campaign on Change.org in Thailand in 2013 secured almost 600,000 signatures. It opposed an amnesty bill that had, at the last minute, been revised to give public officials a free pass on a wide range of historic abuses, including corruption.

This campaign converged with and reinforced nationwide street protests. Ultimately, not only was the bill dropped, but a broader political

transition and dialogue is now underway in Thailand, with exciting conversations brewing about how to build a more participatory democracy.

In Brazil, the Congress of Deputies tried to pass the PEC37 bill to exempt themselves from investigation for political corruption. State prosecutors responded by forging a campaigning alliance with the public, by starting a petition on Change.org.⁵

Not only did that campaign go viral and secure hundreds of thousands of signatures, but it also gave birth to hundreds of smaller petitions targeting every legislator individually and challenging them to say how they would vote. When mass street protests blossomed in Brazil, sparked by bus price rises, the campaign against PEC37 was another of their demands. In the end, only eight congresspersons dared to vote for the bill.⁶

In Europe and the United States, we've seen many campaigns effectively target corporations and politicians, as well as domino effects, in which countless smaller petitions help drive deep cultural change.

For example, Bank of America, Spain's La Caixa and other corporations have had to give way to waves of consumer pressure over banking fees.⁷ The Boy Scouts of America agreed to accept gay scouts after being targeted by a swarm of hundreds of petitions on Change.

org signed by almost two million people.⁸ And in the UK, a wave of mainstream feminist campaigns on Change.org drove a powerful national story of empowerment in 2013 and 2014, with prominent victories including the successful campaign for the Bank of England to put women on banknotes and a petition for better education on female genital mutilation, which was strongly supported by *The Guardian* among others.⁹

In France, the shoe store ERAM committed to make its supply chain deforestation-free by 2015 after being targeted by an environmental association on Change.org and is now engaging in dialogue with them to help make this a reality.¹⁰

Another campaign with global resonance was started by the Somali diaspora community in the UK. They pressured Barclays Bank to reconsider its decision to cut off cooperation with money transfer services on which their families in Somalia depend and secured massive support and reinforcements from Olympic winning athlete Mo Farah and Oxfam. Barclays responded, and a court ruling has kept the remittance services open until a sustainable solution can be found.¹¹

CIVIL SOCIETY COLLABORATIONS

By lowering the barriers to social action and helping the most powerful campaign stories

to spread widely, Change.org has empowered individuals, networks and other informal actors to play a greater role in creating change in their own lives and communities.

At the same time, existing civil society organisations (CSOs) have started to discover the potential of the platform for impact and movement-building. We see particular potential when organisations take a servant leadership approach, that is putting their supporters wishes and priorities ahead of top-down driven priorities and objectives, tapping into the bottom-up energy on Change.org and supporting, amplifying and channelling organic campaigns. Oxfam did this on the Somali remittances issue, and Scouts for Equality and GLAAD, a CSO that promotes LGBT issues in the media, took a similar approach towards the Boy Scouts of America.

Both through our free tools and through partner services such as sponsored campaigns, Change.org has also acted as a matchmaker for civil society, helping hundreds of organisations build their supporter bases and enabling millions of our users to connect in a deeper and more sustained way with the issues they care about.

Organisations using Change.org successfully today include some the oldest and most established international CSOs, as well as a wide range of new movements such as

Mayors against Illegal Guns and Walk Free, a foundation focusing on ending modern slavery. Whether you are seeking to reach your first thousand supporters or build a millions-strong base, Change.org is becoming a potentially valuable partner.

LOOKING FORWARD

We see enabling greater collective action through CSOs as an intrinsic part of our mission of empowerment. We also want to help enrich the fundamental infrastructure of global civil society and democracy in even more ways in the coming years.

Media are already starting to see the platform as a kind of newswire for social change. And decision-makers are increasingly engaging with and responding to campaigns on Change.org, with the mayors of Barcelona, London and San Francisco among our earliest adopters.

Change.org starts with people, from the bottom up, with the issues that are of concern to them in their lives and communities. So while some campaigns on the platform cross borders, it should be no surprise that the vast majority of campaigns on the platform are local or national in scope.

However, this does not mean that these campaigns are irrelevant to global governance. As many of us who have worked at the

global level know all too well, sustainable global change has to be rooted in shifts at the national level, and in people's attitudes and daily lives. This imperative is only increased in an era of turbulence, multipolarity and distributed governance, where local people want to be in charge of local policy and decision-making processes.

Positive global change is a challenge that will demand the active involvement of a much larger part of humanity over the next decade. That's why I believe it is critically important that Change.org is energising tens of millions more people every year, helping them to realise that by joining together with others, they can make a difference on issues near and far. It is about numbers, but not only about numbers – it's about millions of people being engaged, believing, and acting for change. Connecting global governance issues to millions of people directly.

We have begun by helping people everywhere move beyond impotence or passivity and discover their own power to make a difference. We also want to help change the rules of the game of governance and decision-making.

Our vision is of a future where no one is powerless, where creating change is part of everyday life and where public norms demand of decision-makers that they engage in active and constructive dialogue with civic stakeholders and constituencies. And as citizens

awaken and organise increasingly effectively, I think we will see this increasingly in regional, multilateral and global contexts too.

For the future, one final possibility I am excited about is swarming change. We have seen flashes of this recently in the Arab Spring, India Against Corruption and Occupy. And we have seen the green shoots of more practical and focused swarming on Change.org, as dozens or hundreds of smaller petitions join together to address a big issue from multiple angles.

Within a couple of years, I hope to see these pro-social swarms evolving to a new level. It will become much more common to see many different campaigns, rooted in specific local experiences but with common themes or targets, clustering together through Change.org and other platforms and having increasingly systemic impact on multinational corporations and governments.

However, all of these possibilities will only be realised through the collective efforts of citizens and organisations everywhere. Change.org's mission is a supportive and enabling one, and we look forward to helping many more of you create the change you want to see.

¹For more information, please see: <http://www.change.org/en-GB>.

²I Mahditama, Taking it to the Internet: People Power 2.0, The Jakarta Post, 30 November 2012, available at: <http://www.thejakarapost.com/news/2012/11/30/taking-it-internet-people-power-20.html>.

³For more information, please see: <http://www.change.org/es-AR/peticiones/urgente-reglamentacion-nueva-ley-de-diabetes>.

⁴J Reno, Change.org Petitions Cover Issues From Sarah Palin To Human Trafficking To The Rape Of Lesbians In South Africa: A New Model For Global Change, International Business Times, 20 December 2013, available at: <http://www.ibtimes.com/changeorg-petitions-cover-issues-sarah-palin-human-trafficking-rape-lesbians-south-africa-new-model>.

⁵For more information, please see: <https://www.change.org/petitions/her-excellency-yingluck-shinawatra-prime-minister-of-thailand-stop-the-mae-wong-dam-from-destroying-prime-tiger-habitat>.

⁶J Reno, Change.org Petitions Cover Issues From Sarah Palin To Human Trafficking To The Rape Of Lesbians In South Africa: A New Model For Global Change, International Business Times, 20 December 2013, available at: <http://www.ibtimes.com/changeorg-petitions-cover-issues-sarah-palin-human-trafficking-rape-lesbians-south-africa-new-model>.

⁷Y Mui, Bank of America scraps debit card fee after consumer backlash, The Washington Post, 1 November 2011, available at: http://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/bank-of-american-drops-debit-card-fee/2011/11/01/gIQA0vugcM_story.html.

⁸For more information, please see: <http://www.change.org/petitions/overturn-ban-on-gay-scouts>.

⁹Woman of £10 note: Jane Austen to appear on new tenners, Channel 4, 24 July 2013, available at: <http://www.channel4.com/news/jane-austen-banknote-money-bank-of-england-carney>.

¹⁰F Dèbes, Eram répond par le dialogue à la pétition web d'une ONG, Les Echos, 24 October 2013, available at: <http://m.business.lesechos.fr/directions-generales/gouvernance/eram-repond-par-le-dialogue-a-la-petition-web-d-une-ong-56036.php>.

¹¹For more information, please see: <https://www.change.org/petitions/the-barclays-uk-decision-on-the-somali-msbs-accounts-barclays-to-reconsider-its-decision>.