

CHAPTER 4 – Issues

The issue is not the issue.
(Berkeley 1964)

Choosing a campaign for your group is very important as it will define your organization in the eyes of the public, and increase your chances for success or failure based on the wisdom of your choice. At the beginning of the school year (or at the end of a campaign) you should brainstorm a list of issues and then narrow it down.

The following is a list of criteria for selecting an issue from the manual “Organizing for Social Change” by the Midwest Academy (they train community activists). While it is hard to meet all of them, it is a useful checklist for comparing issues. Here we’ll show how you could decide between starting a recycling program, fighting a locally proposed incinerator, and challenging Shell for its complicity in environmental destruction and human rights abuses in Nigeria.



Selection Criteria	Recycling Program	Incinerator	Shell in Nigeria
1. Result in Real Improvement in People's Lives	Not really, other than a small warm feeling because some of your trash is being recycled.	Yes. Major health benefits (protection from dioxins, other toxic byproducts, and cancer!)	Ends ecological destruction and murder of indigenous people. No measurable improvement for non-Nigerians.
2. Give People a Sense of Their Own Power	Kind-of. Winning a recycling program is not a huge deal.	Yes. Huge.	Yes. Huge.
3. Alter Relations of Power	No, or very little. Recycling programs are mainstream.	Yes. Strengthens community activists to resist corporate domination.	Yes. Forces corporations to act less murderous and empowers Nigerian activists by lessening corporate sponsored repression.
4. Be Worthwhile	Yes.	Yes. More so than recycling.	Yes. More so than recycling.
5. Be Winnable	Yes, easily.	Yes, harder.	Yes, but very hard and will take a lot of help from other groups.
6. Be Widely Felt	Yes.	No, but once people know about the dangers they can / will change a lot.	No, but education can help a little.
7. Be Deeply Felt	Maybe. Some people are very committed, whereas others see recycling as only a small step.	Yes.	Yes.
8. Be Easy to Understand	Very easy.	More complex.	More complex (foreign country).

9. Have a Clear Target	Yes. School administration.	Yes. State Environmental Agency (or municipal government).	Yes. Shell (the bastards!).
10. Have a Clear Time Frame that Works for You	Winnable in a year and if you initiate the issue, you can set the time line.	Government or the incinerator corporation sets much of the time line.	You can help set the time line. But you need to fight until you win.
11. Be Non-Divisive	Yes, how can anyone disagree with recycling?	Yes.	Yes.
12. Build Leadership	Yes. Improves your ability to negotiate with your administration.	Builds activist skills (organizing rallies, press releases, and petitions) with a community activism emphasis.	Builds activist skills, with an emphasis on international solidarity work.
13. Set your Organization for the Next Campaign	Can move on to reducing other environmental harm that your school does.	By building alliances within the community you are ready to tackle another community environmental problem (there are a never-ending number).	Could tackle more international issues (Free Burma, global trade agreements over-ruling environmental laws).
14. Have a pocketbook angle	No.	No.	No.
15. Raise Money	No.	Yes, you could canvass the community for donations.	No.
16. Be Consistent with Your Values and Vision	Yes (though depends on how radical your vision is).	Yes (particularly for a community – oriented group).	Yes (more international).

As you can see from this example, there are often several good issues for a group to choose, and which one it picks depends upon what members of the organization want to focus on. In this case, while the recycling program falls short in some of the criteria, a small or new group might want to take it on to get an easy win early on to build the organization before moving on to tougher fights.

Keep in mind that you should aim for structural change. For instance, instead of creating a volunteer recycling program that you will have to spend all your time to staff, you should get your school to institutionalize one. Then your group will have the energy to tackle the next issue. Band-aids are good (e.g., cleanups), but stopping the person/institution who is causing the bleeding is best (corporations who pollute).

There is a delicate balance between tackling big issues and taking on a campaign you feel pretty confident you can win. Sure you'd love to get Congress to pass a bill banning all old-growth logging, but you would probably stand a better chance saving the nearest forest in your state. For an active group, it's probably best to mix local and more easily achievable campaigns (where you can clearly see your impact) with regional/national/international ones where you'll learn a lot by networking with other people and have a chance of being the difference between a large failure and a large success!

One thing the Midwest Academy excludes from their criteria is that the issue you choose is incredibly critical in determining who will be interested in joining your group. If you spend all your time working on forest activism, global warming, and recycling, then your organization is going to be extremely white and middle-class. If you work on community issues you may be working with more people of color and members of the working class. Here again you might want to try working both on a campus issue (which is probably easier to mobilize students around) and a community one. If you care about diversity (and you should!), try networking with campus workers (support the right to unionize), workers off-campus (e.g., farm workers, city campaigns for a living wage), and tackling cases of environmental racism and classism (where corporations are disproportionately dumping toxins on people of color and the poor).

You can also frame and organize around traditional environmental issues so that they become environmental justice causes. For instance, instead of working to simply 'save the rainforest' you could make sure to include information in your campaigning about how deforestation is being driven by the oppression of indigenous people and the important links between rainforest destruction and poverty in the developing world. Include an analysis of where your university's waste goes in your campaign to create or improve your recycling program. It's probably getting dumped on poor and people of color communities. Try to support struggles that concern and are led by people of color, the poor, women, and queers.