



Naming Justice, Practising Advocacy: A Scoping Review of Social-Justice and Social Transformation

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Abstract

Social-justice and advocacy are frequently invoked together, yet social-justice theory and advocacy-focused empirical literature rarely engage, leaving their relationship underexamined despite its importance to social transformation. This interdisciplinary review addresses that gap, examining how the two are conceptualised, practised, and connected to social transformation across theology, human rights, development studies, education, social work, political science, and law. Guided by the JBI scoping review's PCC framework (Peters et al., 2020), it pursued five objectives: comparing theoretical traditions, mapping frameworks connecting them, classifying advocacy's forms, actors, and strategies, mapping outcomes for justice-relevant change, and identifying evidence and conceptual gaps. A PRISMA-ScR-guided search (2 September 2026; 2020–2026 window) yielded 1,452 records: 33 retained as primary evidence, one as background literature, excluded with documented reasons at full-text screening. Social-justice is theorised through twelve-plus traditions distributive, capability-based, recognition-redistribution-representation, structural-injustice, intersectional, virtue-ethical, theologically grounded while advocacy spans individual to transnational scales, underscoring the theory–practice divergence; evidence of its justice-relevant outcomes remains sparse. Global South and African representation remain a corpus minority; the review cannot tell indexing bias from a genuine publishing gap, a question for future research. The evidence supports no linear pathway from justice diagnosis to advocacy to transformation, only a fragmented, multidirectional, context-dependent relationship. It proposes a provisional synthesis, a heuristic for future research and practice rather than a validated causal model, and identifies priorities for future theoretical, empirical, and Global South-led scholarship. Justice-oriented practice, it suggests, depends less on theory than on deliberately coupling theory and advocacy within capable institutions.

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Introduction

Social-justice and advocacy are among the most-invoked yet inconsistently defined constructs in social transformation scholarship, anchored in Rawlsian fairness (Rawls, 1971), the capability approach (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000), and Fraser's (2005) framework. Their relationship is widely assumed but rarely examined: advocacy is treated as translating justice diagnosis into change, while justice theory is treated as its normative warrant, without which advocacy risks collapsing into charity or directionless contest (Panter-Brick, 2021; Bali et al., 2020).

This question is urgent across faith-based advocacy (Panter-Brick, 2021), civil-society (Arugay & Baquisal, 2023), and education (Bali et al., 2020), yet how consistently theory and practice connect,



and under what conditions advocacy produces structural change, remains unclear (Burgess, 2024). This gap calls for a scoping review: the literature is heterogeneous in discipline, method, and genre, and scoping methodology maps conceptual architecture rather than adjudicating narrow questions (Peters et al., 2020). This review locates where evidence is thin or absent.

Conceptualising Social-Justice and Advocacy

Social-justice is conceptualised through overlapping traditions rather than one settled definition (Campbell, 2021): distributive-liberal (Rawls, 1971), capability (Klaasen, 2020; Randal et al., 2020), Fraser's (2005) most-applied framework (Call et al., 2023), and structural-injustice theory (Young, 1990, 2011; McKeown, 2021). A theological cluster recurs throughout: Catholic Social Teaching (Blackmer, 2025; Hollenbach, 2022; Gesowan, 2024; Nzekwe, 2026; Panter-Brick, 2021); a Reformed diakonia tradition (Pillay, 2022); Ngubane and Makua's (2021) Ubuntu-Fraser synthesis; and Raby's (2020) account of Peru's working children's movement.

Several of the richest theoretical treatments avoid "social-justice" as their own vocabulary. Hollenbach's (2022) "relational human rights," Randal et al.'s (2020) "distributive/transport justice," McKeown's (2021) "structural-injustice" retained here as continuous with social-justice theorising elsewhere. Advocacy is conceptualised as a family of forms: institutional (Blackmer, 2025; Rafiqi et al., 2026), grassroots/coalition-based (Yukich et al., 2020; Bloemraad & Voss, 2020), transnational (Schierup et al., 2023), and digital (Kim & Kim, 2023).

Social transformation is consistently distinguished from charity: Bali et al. (2020) classify practices as transformative, ameliorative, neutral, or negative, echoed by Fraser's affirmative/transformative distinction (Call et al., 2023); Forde et al. (2021) find peacebuilding privileges symbolic reconciliation over structural change.

Purpose of the Study

This scoping review follows the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) methodology (Peters et al., 2020), mapping how social-justice and advocacy are conceptualised, practised, and connected to social transformation across seven disciplines, pursuing five objectives:

1. Compare definitions and theoretical traditions of social-justice and advocacy.
2. Map frameworks connecting the two constructs.
3. Classify advocacy's forms, actors, and strategies.
4. Assess mechanisms and outcomes linking advocacy to justice-relevant change.
5. Identify evidence and conceptual gaps, including Global South representation, informing a provisional framework.

Together (O1–O5), these objectives structure the Findings below and guide future research toward the gaps identified.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This review applies Fraser's redistribution-recognition-representation model as its organising lens, distinct from Objective 1's traditions and selected as the corpus's most applied framework (Call et al., 2023; Bali et al., 2020), its dimensions mapping onto material claims, recognition, and voice.

A second axis, the ameliorative/transformative distinction (Bali et al., 2020; Call et al., 2023; Burgess, 2024), separates practices that ameliorate injustice's effects from those restructuring its causes. Two limits apply: this is a reviewer's organising choice, not a claim of Fraser's theoretical superiority; and Fraser's broadly secular model maps imperfectly onto the corpus's theological content (Blackmer, 2025; Pillay, 2022), analysed here on its own terms.



Methodology

Research Design

This review adopted a scoping design to synthesise conceptual, theoretical, and empirical evidence on social-justice and advocacy as interdependent constructs, given the corpus's methodological heterogeneity (Peters et al., 2020), following PRISMA-ScR and JBI methodology throughout.

The review adopted the Population–Concept–Context (PCC) framework: Population comprised marginalised communities and civil-society/faith-based advocates; Concept comprised social-justice (normative/diagnostic) and advocacy (strategic/practical), distinct but interdependent; Context spanned Catholic social teaching, human rights, development, and education.

The search was conducted on 2 September 2026 across six core databases (Scopus, Web of Science, ATLA Religion Database, JSTOR, ProQuest, EBSCOhost), supplemented by Google Scholar and grey literature. A total of 1,452 records were identified.

The programme specifies construct-specific Boolean strings for Social-Justice and Advocacy rather than a merged string, since a conjunctive string would exclude literature engaging one construct richly without the other (Table 1). The 2020–2026 window applies only to primary evidence.

Table 1: Search Strategy and Boolean Search Terms

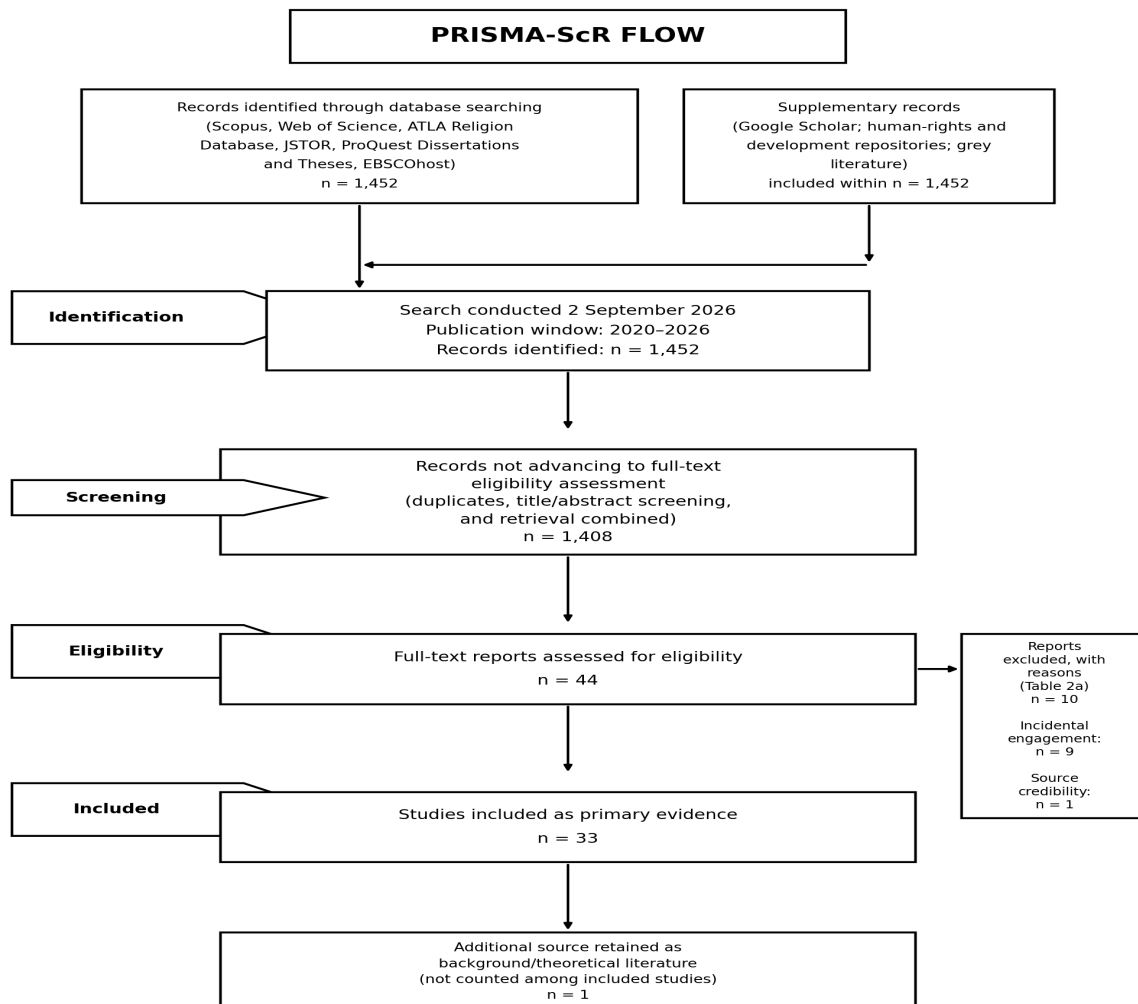
Construct	String label	Boolean search string
Social-Justice	Broad	("social-justice" OR "distributive-justice" OR "structural-injustice" OR "social injustice" OR "justice-oriented practice") AND (conceptualisation OR definition OR theory OR framework OR "structural analysis") AND (dignity OR rights OR equity OR fairness OR participation OR exclusion)
Social-Justice	Catholic / Faith-Based	("social-justice" OR "structural sin" OR "preferential option for the poor" OR "Catholic social teaching") AND (dignity OR "common good" OR solidarity OR subsidiarity OR participation) AND (theology OR "faith-based" OR ecclesial OR church OR pastoral)
Social-Justice	Social Transformation / Community Development	("social-justice" OR "structural-injustice" OR "social inequality" OR "systemic exclusion") AND ("social transformation" OR "community development" OR empowerment OR "civil-society") AND (marginalised OR vulnerable OR "Global South" OR Africa)
Advocacy	Broad	(advocacy OR "policy engagement" OR "community mobilisation" OR "collective action" OR campaigning) AND ("social-justice" OR "human rights" OR equity OR "structural-injustice") AND (strategy OR mechanism OR actor OR outcome OR impact)
Advocacy	Catholic / Faith-Based	(advocacy OR "prophetic witness" OR "prophetic action" OR "social apostolate" OR accompaniment) AND ("Catholic social teaching" OR church OR ecclesial OR "faith-based") AND (justice OR "preferential option" OR solidarity OR "public engagement")
Advocacy	Social Transformation / Community Development	(advocacy OR "community organising" OR "grassroots mobilisation" OR empowerment) AND ("social transformation" OR "community development" OR "civil-society" OR "collective voice") AND (marginalised OR vulnerable OR "Global South" OR Africa)

Note. Reproduced from the originating programme's Boolean strategy; databases and date-range scope reported above.

Eligibility criteria, adopted from the originating programme, were applied at full-text screening: sources were retained only where they substantively engaged social-justice and/or advocacy; several rigorous sources were excluded as vocabulary-only.



Study selection followed the four PRISMA-ScR stages (Figure 1): 1,452 records were identified (2020–2026), screened to 44 full-text reports (combined as $n = 1,408$; see Limitations), of which 33 met the substantive-engagement criterion, one was background, and 10 were excluded.



Note. Search date, publication window, and initial record count ($n = 1,452$) as confirmed by the author. The intermediate breakdown between identification and full-text eligibility assessment (duplicates removed; title/abstract screening exclusions; reports sought and not retrieved) is reported here as a single combined figure, consistent with the level of detail confirmed by the author. Counts from full-text eligibility onward are fully verified against the underlying screening record.

Figure 1: PRISMA-ScR Flow Diagram of Study Selection (Search date: 2 September 2026; publication window: 2020–2026; records identified: $n = 1,452$).

The combined figure ($n = 1,408$) represents records not advancing to full-text eligibility, reported as one net figure since sub-counts were not separately logged (see Limitations).

Of the 10 reports excluded, nine involved incidental engagement vocabulary without substantive development and one on source-credibility grounds.



Data were extracted using a standardised, piloted 19-field charting framework (citation, year, country, discipline, methodology, construct centrality, objective, key contribution, framework, strategies, outcomes, evidentiary category, gaps), informing how Findings are organised (PRISMA-ScR item 10).

Given the corpus's heterogeneity of design, statistical meta-analysis was inappropriate (Peters et al., 2020); the review instead employed thematic narrative synthesis around the five objectives (O1-O5), using five evidence categories descriptively: theoretical, experiential, descriptive, mechanism-level, and evaluated-outcome.

Table 2: Characteristics of the 33 Included Studies (n = 33)

Author/ Year	Country/Region	Study Aim	Methodology	Social- Justice Focus	Advocacy Focus	Social Transformation Dimension
Blanchet Garneau et al. (2021)	Canada (Global North)	Frame equity/social- justice integration for Indigenous peoples in health- professions curricula	Critical (non- systematic) literature review, 26 sources	Central	Incidental	Curricular/organizational decolonisation
Arugay & Baquisal (2023)	Philippines	Analyse state strategies neutralising civil- society under Duterte	Qualitative case study; V-Dem and survey secondary data	Secondary	Central	Democratic erosion / civil- society reinvigoration prospects
Dube (2020)	South Africa	Examine rural learners' exclusion from COVID-19 online learning	Participatory action research; WhatsApp group discussion, N = 15	Central	Incidental	Inclusive, bottom- up educational reform
Campbell (2021)	Not sited (USA- affiliated)	Compare competing definitions/parad- igms of social- justice	Theoretical/argu- mentative essay	Central	Incidental (uses "activism")	Institutional/polic- y reform (contested)
Schierup, Delgado Wise & Ålund (2023)	Transnational/glo- bal governance	Analyse civil- society positionality in global migration governance	Qualitative documentary/the- oretical analysis	Incidental	Central	Contested genuine agency vs. co-optation
Panter- Brick (2021)	US-Mexico border	Examine solidarity, social- justice, and faith in border humanitarianism	Qualitative ethnography, 133 interviews	Central	Secondary /substantive	Structural policy change sought
Call et al. (2023)	USA (predominantly)	Propose an ethics- and-social-justice framework for demographic research data	Conceptual/fram- ework paper	Central	Not present	Affirmative vs. transformative research practice
Yukich et al. (2020)	United States	Explain how organisational group style shapes substantive vs. tokenistic immigrant involvement	Comparative ethnography plus national survey	Incidental	Central	Explicit analytic dimension ("vision of social transformation")



Author/ Year	Country/Region	Study Aim	Methodology	Social- Justice Focus	Advocacy Focus	Social Transformation Dimension
Hollenbach (2022)	Not sited (apartheid South Africa case study)	Ground human rights relationally in dignity and solidarity	Normative philosophical/the ological essay	Secondar y/substa ntive	Not present	Implicit restructured rights/solidarity discourse
Randal et al. (2020)	Aotearoa/New Zealand	Apply distributive- justice theory to transport policy	Conceptual/theor etical concept paper	Central	Not present	Minimal (“just transition” mentioned once)
Rafiqi, Hastira & Maksum (2026)	Transnational (Holy See, OIC, WCC)	Compare transnational faith-based advocacy on child marriage	Qualitative systematic literature review (PRISMA 2020)	Incidenta l	Central	Theology as tool for social transformation (WCC)
Bloemraad & Voss (2020)	United States (comparative)	Periodise and theorise the US pro-immigrant movement	Theoretical/synth esis essay	Incidenta l	Central	Implicit change- oriented movement goals
Pillay (2022)	South Africa (Reformed tradition, global)	Trace social- justice and diakonia in Reformed theology	Theological- historical argumentative essay	Central	Secondary	Central apartheid dismantling, reunification
Smith (2022)	United States (northeast Ohio)	Examine FBOs’ immigration- advocacy and community formation	Qualitative interview study, N = 9	Central	Central	Central explicit structural- transformation aim
Klaasen (2020)	South Africa	Develop socially just pedagogies for higher- education ethics teaching	Theoretical/conce ptual essay	Central	Not present	Central post- apartheid HE transformation
Sporre (2020)	Namibia, South Africa, USA, Canada, Sweden	Compare social- justice in five national ethics curricula	Qualitative content analysis	Central	Not present	Central education as societal transformation
Shi (2020)	United States	Argue green infrastructure must pursue justice and ecological benefit jointly	Perspective/opini on essay	Central	Incidental	Central transformative socio-ecological relationships
Conway et al. (2025)	Europe (comparative, multi-country)	Trace the contested genealogy of the term “social- justice” across 20th-century Europe	Historical/concep tual review (special-issue introduction)	Central	Not present	Central, critically interrogated (risk of co-optation)
McKeown (2021)	United Kingdom (global literature)	Survey philosophical literature on structural- injustice	Systematic literature review (philosophy)	Central	Incidental	Central – theory oriented to correcting unjust structures



Author/ Year	Country/Region	Study Aim	Methodology	Social- Justice Focus	Advocacy Focus	Social Transformation Dimension
Bali, Cronin & Jhangiani (2020)	Egypt, Ireland, Canada (global field)	Frame open educational practices via social-justice theory	Conceptual/typol ogical article	Central	Not present	Central explicit transformative/a meliorative distinction
Gesowan (2024)	Kenya	Analyse the church's changing public role, reconciliation as model	Historical/qualita tive analysis with interviews	Secondar y/substa ntive	Secondary /substanti ve	Central reconciliation/ap ology movements
Fernande s-Jesus, Barnes & Diniz (2020)	Brazil, South Africa, Puerto Rico, Haiti (synthesis)	Synthesise community power and climate/envIRONm ental-justice	Editorial/perspect ive synthesis	Central	Not present	Central "just sustainable transformations"
Ngubane & Makua (2021)	South Africa	Propose Ubuntu pedagogy intersecting Ubuntu and Fraser's theory	Conceptual/theor etical article	Central	Not present	Central stalled HE transformation agenda
Nzekwe (2026)	Not sited (Italy- affiliated; global CST)	Ground ecological responsibility sacramentally in Catholic healthcare	Conceptual/theol ogical essay	Secondar y/substa ntive	Incidental	Institutional sacramental ecology
Burgess (2024)	United Kingdom	Examine Nigerian Pentecostal churches' civic engagement in postsecular London	Qualitative case study	Central	Secondary /substanti ve	Substantive, self- critically framed
Blackmer (2025)	United States (Protestant ecumenical federation)	Trace the Federal Council of Churches' social- justice theology and ecumenical advocacy	Historical/descrip tive review	Central	Central	Substantive policy influence over a century
Raby (2020)	Peru (reviewing Taft, 2019)	Review a monograph on Peru's Movement of Working Children	Peer-reviewed book review	Central	Central	Central explicit "commitment to broad social change"
Garlingto n & Collins (2020)	United States	Ground social work's environmental- justice commitments in virtue theory	Theoretical/conce ptual essay	Central	Secondary /substanti ve	Indirect structural/social change vehicle
Popielarz (2024)	United States	Examine teacher candidates' community-based social-justice learning	Qualitative community-based action research	Central	Central	Central change agency vs. structural inequality
Forde, Kappler &	South Africa (Cape Town)	Propose "spatial reparations" for	Theoretical + qualitative	Central	Secondary /substanti ve	Central structural, not symbolic, transformation



Author/ Year	Country/Region	Study Aim	Methodology	Social- Justice Focus	Advocacy Focus	Social Transformation Dimension
Björkdahl l (2021)	ASEAN region	post-colonial peacebuilding	fieldwork, 2012– 2019	Central	Secondary /substanti ve	Central “transformative strategy for social- justice”
Suyahma n, Karimull ah & Syahril (2025)		Apply intersectionality to social-justice and human rights law	Theoretical/doctri nal legal analysis			
Pherali (2023)	Thailand (Deep South)	Apply Fraser’s justice theory and the 4Rs to education/peaceb uilding	Theoretical/conce ptual paper (secondary research)	Central	Incidental (uses “activism”)	Central critiques top-down liberal reform
Kim & Kim (2023)	United States (Twitter/X, 2021)	Compare hashtag- network responses of two racial-justice protest coalitions	Semantic/hashtag -network analysis of social media data	Secondar y/substa ntive	Central	Substantive economic/global- justice movement goals

Note. NR = Not Reported. Full aims and findings appear in the narrative synthesis and Appendix A (Table A1). The two most recent entries (Nzekwe, 2026; Rafiqi et al., 2026) were re-checked against publisher records.

Findings

Definitions and theoretical traditions of social-justice and advocacy

At least a dozen distinguishable traditions of social-justice appear, none dominant: distributive-liberal (Rawls, 1971; Klaasen, 2020), Fraser’s recognition-redistribution-representation (Call et al., 2023), and structural-injustice, following Young, applied intersectionally by Sporre (2020).

A substantial theological cluster is evidenced: Catholic Social Teaching, the most-invoked tradition, appears centrally in six sources (Blackmer, 2025; Hollenbach, 2022; Gesowan, 2024; Nzekwe, 2026; Panter-Brick, 2021), with Pillay’s (2022) Reformed diakonia doctrinally separate, extended beyond Euro-American sources by Ngubane, Makua, and Raby.

As noted above, several of the richest theoretical treatments avoid “social-justice” as their vocabulary yet remain continuous with it; advocacy, by contrast, is demonstrated through practice far more than theorised, distinguished from charity and self-interested lobbying (Panter-Brick, 2021; Gesowan, 2024).

Normative, theoretical, and analytical frameworks and their connections

Theory is operationalised into applied, domain-specific frameworks: health-professions curricula (Blanchet Garneau et al., 2021), transport policy (Randal et al., 2020), education (Bali et al., 2020; Klaasen, 2020), healthcare governance (Nzekwe, 2026), and peacebuilding (Forde et al., 2021; Pherali, 2023).

The ameliorative/transformative distinction (Bali et al., 2020; Call et al., 2023; Burgess, 2024) recurs independently across education, ethics, and geography, suggesting a genuine, transferable insight.

Forms, actors, and strategies of advocacy

Advocacy is documented from individual (Popielarz, 2024) to congregational (Blackmer, 2025; Yukich et al., 2020), national (Arugay & Baquisal, 2023), and transnational (Rafiqi et al., 2026) scales; Raby (2020) uniquely documents children’s advocacy.



Explicit typologies include Rafiqi et al.'s (2026) three institutional styles, Yukich et al.'s (2020) representative-versus-tokenistic styles, and Kim and Kim's (2023) personalised-versus-unified framing advocacy documented far more richly than theorised.

Mechanisms and evidenced outcomes

Evidence strength weights toward theoretical, experiential, and descriptive claims, with few mechanism-level or evaluated outcomes.

Popielarz (2024) offers an important positive case: pairing teacher candidates with grassroots organisers shifted them toward structural understandings of social-justice work, with direct partnership not classroom reflection moving intention toward action (Bali et al., 2020).

Gaps, including Global South representation, and towards a provisional framework

Three evidence gaps recur most robustly: divergence between theorising and documentation (Objective 1); a theory-evidence trade-off, since the richest theorists (Hollenbach, 2022; McKeown, 2021) report no empirical outcomes while evidence-rich sources engage theory lightly; and minority Global South/ African representation (11 and 7 of 33).

Table 3 maps the review's principal emergent themes against the five objectives.

Table 3: Emergent Themes Mapped Against the Guiding Objectives

Theme	Primary objective(s)	Representative sources
Plural, non-convergent theoretical traditions of social-justice (distributive, capability, recognition-redistribution-representation, structural-injustice, intersectional, theological, virtue-ethical)	O1, O2	Campbell (2021); Hollenbach (2022); Klaasen (2020); McKeown (2021); Randal et al. (2020)
Theological pluralism: Catholic, Reformed, Ubuntu, and liberation/Indigenous traditions as distinct genealogies of justice	O1, O2	Blackmer (2025); Ngubane & Makua (2021); Pillay (2022); Raby (2020)
Deliberate operationalisation of justice theory into applied, domain-specific frameworks	O2	Bali et al. (2020); Call et al. (2023); Randal et al. (2020); Shi (2020)
The ameliorative/transformational distinction as a recurring, independently derived analytic device	O2, O5	Bali et al. (2020); Call et al. (2023); Burgess (2024)
Advocacy documented across individual, congregational, national, and transnational scales	O3	Popielarz (2024); Blackmer (2025); Rafiqi et al. (2026); Schierup et al. (2023)
Advocacy distinguished from charity, lobbying, and clinical/technical usages	O1, O3	Gesowan (2024); Panter-Brick (2021); Smith (2022)
Advocacy under repression and constraint, not only advocacy-to-success	O3, O4	Arugay & Baquisal (2023); Blackmer (2025)
Predominance of descriptive and reported-experience evidence over mechanism-level or evaluated-outcome evidence	O4, O5	Kim & Kim (2023); Yukich et al. (2020); Smith (2022)
Terminological divergence between social-justice theorising and advocacy documentation	O1, O3, O5	Corpus-wide; discussed in Discussion and Critical Synthesis
Global South and African representation present but a minority share, concentrated in South Africa	O5	Dube (2020); Forde et al. (2021); Klaasen (2020); Ngubane & Makua (2021); Raby (2020); Sporre (2020)



Note. Themes emerged inductively; anticipated themes not substantively supported (for example, sustained digital-advocacy treatment beyond Kim & Kim, 2023, and Suyahman et al., 2025) are noted as gaps under Objective 5.

Proposed Conceptual Definition of Social-Justice, Advocacy and Social Transformation

Building on the theory–practice divergence below, the following conceptual definition is proposed provisionally:

Social-justice, advocacy, and social transformation form a conditionally coupled pathway: two ordinarily loosely connected literatures become tightly coupled, capable of transformation, where three conditions hold institutional continuity, a felt charity/justice distinction, and organisational capacity to hold coalition identities together.

Institutional continuity: a sustained justice-theoretic tradition with a standing advocacy apparatus (Blackmer, 2025; Bloemraad & Voss, 2020) lets theory and practice inform each other; explicit separation of service from structural advocacy (Panter-Brick, 2021) grounds advocacy theoretically.

This pathway is the exception, not the dominant configuration, offered as a heuristic rather than a validated model, resting on a small number of tightly coupled sources (Blackmer, 2025; Bloemraad & Voss, 2020; Panter-Brick, 2021; Yukich et al., 2020).

Synthesis of Findings Against Anticipated Themes

Taken together, the 33 included studies support several cross-cutting judgements beyond the Discussion below.

First, and most centrally, the corpus does not support treating “social-justice and advocacy” as one integrated field: the literatures overlap in normative commitment but only partly in vocabulary (Hollenbach, 2022; McKeown, 2021; Kim & Kim, 2023). Second, the corpus reveals a theory-evidence trade-off: sources are disproportionately either theoretically rich and empirically thin, or the reverse. Third, evidence is disproportionately Global North in origin (22 of 33 settings); Global South representation (11 of 33, seven African) includes no East African or Kenyan evidence, and the corpus by design excludes advocacy in explicitly authoritarian contexts. Fourth, community-based and institutional advocacy are far more richly evidenced than individual or technocratic advocacy (Popielarz, 2024; Blackmer, 2025 excepted). Fifth, transformation is far more often claimed than measured; where genuinely evaluated evidence exists (Bloemraad & Voss, 2020; Kim & Kim, 2023), outcomes are modest, contested, or reversible the single most important gap for future research.

Discussion

This review synthesises how social-justice and advocacy are conceptualised, practised, and connected to social transformation; the discussion below qualifies, rather than confirms, that theory translates smoothly into practice.

On plural traditions (O1, O2): distributive, capability-based, recognition-based, structural-injustice, and theological traditions coexist engaging, but not confirming, Campbell’s (2021) narrowing concern, since traditions are explicitly synthesised (Call et al., 2023; Bali et al., 2020).

On operationalising theory (O2): the corpus shows sophisticated integration within single applied fields (Randal et al., 2020; Bali et al., 2020), but these rarely engage advocacy, the outward-facing practice connecting a framework to a public audience.

On advocacy’s forms and conditions (O3): rich evidence on constraining conditions leadership succession (Blackmer, 2025), state repression (Arugay & Baquisal, 2023), and internal group style (Yukich et al., 2020) conditions capacity organisationally as much as theoretically.



On outcomes (O4): the corpus skews toward theoretical and descriptive evidence, consistent with advocacy outcomes being difficult to evaluate generally (Rossi, 2023); where mechanism-level evidence appears (Yukich et al., 2020; Kim & Kim, 2023), both use comparative design.

Research Gaps and Directions for Future Inquiry

This review's most actionable implication: comparative, rather than single-case, designs generate mechanism-level evidence disproportionately (Yukich et al., 2020; Kim & Kim, 2023) and should be prioritised.

Limitations

This review has several limitations, disclosed to clarify rather than diminish its contribution. First, intermediate PRISMA-ScR screening figures are combined ($n = 1,408$) rather than itemised (item 12). Second, the six-database-plus-supplementary search is fuller than the five databases referenced in this manuscript's drafting instructions, a discrepancy that does not narrow the evidentiary base. Third, only English-language sources were screened, of particular consequence given the corpus's Catholic Social Teaching concentration and unrepresented Spanish-, Portuguese-, and French-language traditions. Fourth, source-credibility screening excluded one source, Roy and Ravi Kumar (2025), with particular consequence for Global South representation. Fifth, marked heterogeneity of design precluded quantitative synthesis. Sixth, included sources conceptualise both constructs differently, so the substantive/incidental inclusion boundary required interpretive judgement, transparently documented. Seventh, one included source, Smith (2022), is an undergraduate thesis rather than a peer-reviewed publication, drawn on for qualitative interview evidence ($N = 9$); its evidentiary weight should be read accordingly.

Conclusion

This scoping review mapped how social-justice and advocacy are conceptualised, practised, and connected to social transformation across an interdisciplinary literature spanning theology, human rights, education, social work, political science, human geography, peacebuilding, law, and communication studies.

Social-justice is theorised through a genuine plurality of traditions distributive, capability-based, recognition-redistribution-representation, structural-injustice, intersectional, virtue-ethical, theological none dominant. Advocacy spans individual to transnational scales, shaped by funding, repression, and internal dynamics.

The strongest, most replicated theme is that social-justice theorising and advocacy documentation proceed along separate disciplinary tracks, converging in only a minority of sources – not the linear pathway assumed, but the fragmented, conditionally coupled pathway this review proposes as a heuristic.

Major gaps include the scarcity of mechanism-level and evaluated-outcome evidence; the concentration of Global South evidence absent from East Africa; and the English-language restriction leaving Catholic and liberation-theological scholarship unrepresented.

Areas for Future Research

Scholarship and practice need three things next: comparative research connecting justice theory to evaluated advocacy outcomes; institutional strategies bridging internal frameworks to external advocacy; and sustained, Global-South-led scholarship testing this synthesis.



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Appendix A: Internal Evidence-Verification Matrix

Table A1 maps each included study's contribution to the review's five guiding objectives. For all 33 included studies and the one background/theoretical source, it records whether each contributes substantively (●), partially or incidentally (◐), or not at all (○) to each objective. This matrix was constructed from the full per-article data-charting record, before the Discussion and Synthesis of Findings Against Anticipated Themes sections above were drafted. Every included study appears at least once with a substantive (●) rating on at least one objective. This provides a transparent, source-by-source record of the evidentiary basis for the synthesis above.

Table A1: Internal Evidence-Verification Matrix, by Objective

Author/Year	O1	O2	O3	O4	O5
Blanchet Garneau et al. (2021)	◐	●	○	○	●
Arugay & Baquisal (2023)	○	◐	●	●	●
Dube (2020)	◐	●	○	◐	●
Campbell (2021)	●	●	○	○	◐
Schierup, Delgado Wise & Ålund (2023)	○	●	●	◐	◐
Panther-Brick (2021)	●	●	●	◐	●
Call et al. (2023)	●	●	○	○	◐
Yukich et al. (2020)	○	◐	●	●	●
Hollenbach (2022)	●	●	○	○	◐
Randal et al. (2020)	●	●	○	○	◐
Rafiqi, Hastira & Maksum (2026)	○	●	●	◐	●
Bloemraad & Voss (2020)	◐	●	●	●	●
Pillay (2022)	●	●	◐	◐	●
Smith (2022)	◐	◐	●	●	●
Klaasen (2020)	●	●	○	○	◐
Sporre (2020)	●	◐	○	○	●
Shi (2020)	◐	●	◐	◐	●
Conway et al. (2025)	●	◐	○	○	●
McKeown (2021)	●	●	◐	○	●
Bali, Cronin & Jhangiani (2020)	◐	●	○	◐	●
Gesowan (2024)	◐	●	◐	◐	●
Fernandes-Jesus, Barnes & Diniz (2020)	●	●	◐	◐	●
Ngubane & Makua (2021)	●	●	○	○	●
Nzekwe (2026)	◐	◐	◐	○	◐
Burgess (2024)	◐	●	◐	◐	●
Blackmer (2025)	◐	●	●	◐	●
Raby (2020)	◐	◐	●	◐	●
Garlington & Collins (2020)	●	●	◐	○	◐
Popielarz (2024)	●	●	●	◐	◐
Forde, Kappler & Björkdahl (2021)	●	●	◐	●	●
Suyahman, Karimullah & Syahril (2025)	●	●	◐	○	●
Pherali (2023)	●	●	◐	○	●
Kim & Kim (2023)	◐	◐	●	●	●
Rossi (2023) – background	○	●	○	○	○

Note. O1 = definitions and theoretical traditions; O2 = normative/theoretical/analytical frameworks and connections; O3 = forms, actors, and strategies of advocacy; O4 = mechanisms and evidenced outcomes; O5 = gaps, including Global South representation, and provisional framework. ● = substantive contribution; ◐ = partial or incidental contribution; ○ = no contribution identified. Rossi (2023) is included in this matrix for completeness, as the review's one retained background/theoretical source. This is consistent with its treatment throughout this manuscript as informing interpretation (O2, social-movement strategy theory), rather than as primary evidence.