

Non-Governmental Organizations and Advocacy: Lessons and Prescriptions for Policy Change

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Introduction

Advocacy is a highly political exercise and virtually synonymous with policy reform. It is through advocacy that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) invariably articulate their perspectives about a policy issue, insist on their viewpoints, negotiate with policy and decision makers and showcase a good project or activity for replication and sustainability. Advocacy is also a venue by which to compete with various stakeholders for resources and resource allocation.

This paper deals with NGOs and their core efforts to contribute to policy reform through advocacy. It is a discussion on how NGOs conduct their advocacy and the lessons learned from these experiences. The paper also points to the direction for future advocacy work and the challenges that might go with it.

The paper uses the case studies on NGO advocacy done in 1997 by the Advocacy Working Group (AWG) as main reference. The AWG was composed of NGO advocates such as the Freedom from Debt Coalition and the Action for Economic Reforms, their donor partners and this author. The effort was supported by donor agencies such as Christian Aid, Oxfam Great Britain and Oxfam America and the NCOS Belgium. All donor agencies are engaged in advocacy work, which explains why they take an interest in the issues and problems of advocacy. Among those studied in 1997 were 12 NGOs engaged in advocacy work. These NGOs included the Freedom from Debt Coalition, SIBOL (a network of women's groups involved in legislative advocacy), Tambuyog Development Center, Philippine Peasant Institute, Congress for People's Agrarian Reform, Balay Mindanao Foundation, Inc., Ethnic Studies Development Center, Cooperative Foundation of the Philippines Inc., Nacfar, National Confederation of Labor and CO-TRAIN's environmental project in the Calabarzon. Using some tentative guidelines for assessing advocacy, the paper tackles the achievements and weaknesses of advocacy work and what these imply for future work and challenges. The indicators used are the following:

- a. Objectives
- b. Targets and Tiers of Advocacy
- c. Advocacy Implementation and Techniques

Non-governmental Organizations and Advocacy: Defining Some Key Concepts and Terms.

The rise to prominence and recognition of the non-profit, non-governmental or voluntary sector has brought with it the emergence of a sub-culture of NGOs. Part of this sub-culture are terminologies that are peculiar to people in the NGO world.

Non-governmental, non-profit organization : There are varied ways to refer to NGOs and non-profit organizations. Most literature and documents refer to them as *civil society organizations*; others call them *development organizations*; the word also includes donor or grant-giving international organizations. David Korten coined the term *public service contractor*, which may strike some as having merce-

nary overtones and may connote an organization that is a do-gooder-for-pay. Others have defined the organization by referring to membership base, hence the terms *community-based organization* and *grassroots organization*. Fernando Aldaba (1993) distinguished between *non-governmental organizations* that are more often than not of middle-class origin and whose membership is professional and educated, whilst implying that *grassroots organisations'* membership tend to emerge from the lower sections of society. The common thread that runs across these organizations is, in the words of Ian Smillie (1995, 22), altruism – the philosophy and the historic record of humanistic service. In this paper, these organizations — whether referred to as non-governmental, non-profit, voluntary or community-based organizations — are seen as contributing to and working towards change in policies that affect public lives, especially the poor and those on the margins of society. These organizations are engaged with decision-makers and the processes of policy decisions that affect the lives of many poor people. Non-governmental organizations referred to in this context are politically engaged groups.

Advocacy: *Advocacy* is another key term used to refer to activities and processes in which NGOs engage, with the objective that these activities contribute to right unequal power relations. Advocacy likewise refers to the act or process by which NGOs and people's organizations demand, defend or maintain a cause before a body of authority that includes among others, the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government. Even if democratic institutions are in place and exercises such as elections exist, advocacy is meant to provide *substance* to the democratic process so that weaker populations could emerge from a state of disenfranchisement. The aim of advocacy is to effect reforms in policies, attitudes and practices. In social movement theory, this approach is often called unreasonable because it insists on changing the structures of the world to serve the interests of the poor.

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Through the freedoms of speech, press, assembly and association, advocacy legitimizes the opinions of those whose power is less in the formal processes of decision making.

Policy Cycle: The cycle of a policy refers to the life process of policy, the most political activity viewed from a governmental perspective. Policy is also considered to be highly political by most NGOs, a reason that they engage with government on policy at its various stages – from the making or formulation of a policy, its implementation, monitoring and evaluation, as well as policy reform. Each stage of a policy, which aggregately constitutes the policy cycle, offers an opportunity for reform and therefore, for advocacy.

Policy Reform: Policy reforms refer to specific and tangible gains emanating from advocacy initiatives that result in a change in policy or provisions of a policy, attitude, behaviour or practice.

Policy and Decision Makers: Policy and decision makers are people in either the executive, legislative or judicial branches of government, and whose opinions and decisions matter in public policy. Whilst they are mostly political, either elected to or appointed to public offices, they also include individuals who have authority by virtue of their positions and responsibilities.

Observations and Lessons from NGOs' Experiences in Advocacy

1. Advocacy's intended objectives are not necessarily the achieved outcomes. There is often difficulty in defining objectives and target outcomes of advocacy work.

Not a few evaluations on the outcomes and impact of advocacy have been undertaken by both local and international development organizations. Almost every donor agency that supports advocacy work had at some point, sought an evaluation of the advocacy and its outcomes. Based on these assessments, the bone of contention is often the measure of success. Both donors and local NGOs find it difficult to measure the outcomes and impact of advocacy because NGOs claim that advocacy is a fluid and context-based activity. There are many variables that affect advocacy and that are outside the control of the actors. One of these vari-

ables is the changing political mood of decision makers, which then determines the direction of a decision on a given issue. A change in political leadership, for example, may alter the interpretation of a policy and consequently, of the manner of advocacy on said policy. These factors are difficult to determine and are difficult for advocates to predict at the outset. It is likewise difficult for the actors to set out very specific objectives and parameters, unlike in a project such as health, whose outcomes might be easily measurable in terms of the number of trainees trained or health services delivered, or a credit facility program in which the number of borrowers to target and the total costs of loans to extend might easily be pre-determined.

Because of such difficulties, advocates claim that the achievement of advocacy outcomes may not necessarily correspond to intended targets and objectives. What one aims for is not necessarily what one achieves in the end because of unpredictable intervening factors.

It is common for NGOs to fall short of the targeted outcomes. There is often a lack of clarity of objectives and targets. Clarity refers to realistic measures or indicators of advocacy outcomes that are measurable and specific.

It is often the case that advocacy is intended for high, even idealistic, goals and ends. Some advocacy objectives are broadly stated, almost impossible to gauge and wanting in specific and measurable targets. Often articulated as vision, some advocacy objectives defy measurement. At the end of the activity, debates ensue between the advocates and the donor and among the advocates themselves regarding the targets and outcomes of advocacy.

Another interesting observation about objectives and outcomes is that there are achieved outcomes and impacts that were not targeted at the onset of advocacy.

Advocates should be quick to adapt to changing events and to calibrate the objectives of advocacy based on these changes. Although events quickly change, the fluid turn of events is not an excuse for avoiding objectives and target outputs. Objectives can be defined in specific ways and with measurable indicators. In mid-stream of advocacy activities, it might be necessary to guard against changes and what these might mean to the objectives set by the advocacy. In case of changes,

there should be flexibility in the parameters and objectives – and in such cases, the advocates should promptly inform and level off with donors about these changes.

2. A common objective of advocacy is general information and education amongst the general public. Often, advocates are not clear about who they want to reach by way of information, education and action.

A common objective of advocacy is information and education amongst a broad group. Many advocacy efforts inform and educate the broad public, but with little recognition that education is effective if targeted at a particular audience and proposes a precise course of action. Target remains a basic problem of NGO advocacy. Are the targets local authorities? Companies? Congress? Sections of the community? It is often quite difficult to simply state that the general public is the target of the advocacy. The challenge for NGOs is to be more focused and specific in their target group and to offer clearly stated courses of action if they want to mobilize the target groups. For example, if advocates aim to reach medical practitioners and professionals, the language and substance of the information campaign should then be attuned to such groups, and if the advocacy wishes to generate action and support from these groups, the plea for action should then be on possible courses of action that are realistic and appropriate to medical practitioners such as in prescription of medicines. Or if the advocacy is meant to reach consumers, then the course of action should spell out options with regard to purchase, consumption or patronage of medicines.

Impact is gained through clear targeting of a specific group or audience. Different audiences may result in confusing messages and gross loss of impact.

3. Some good examples of effective advocacy clearly indicate key result areas.

Some examples of clearly framed key result areas were defined by SIBOL, the Freedom from Debt Coalition and the Tambuyog Development Center as follows:

- a. Passage and adoption of a policy that supports the cause of NGOs (such as Republic Act 8353 redefining “rape” (in SIBOL’s advocacy) or the approval of the debt cap in 1991 by Congress including the passing of resolutions

- supporting the debt cap by provincial boards and city councils (an advocacy by Freedom from Debt Coalition) or the adoption of the Community Based Coastal Resource Management policy by municipal councils (framed by Tambuyog Development Center);
- b. Affirmative execution of existing laws (such as the decisive intervention and affirmation by President Ramos of 100 hectares of the Quisumbing estate in favour of the Sumilao farmers); and
 - c. Generation of communications of support and solidarity from various groups addressed to the Office of the President (such as international support for the FDC advocacy and for the Sumilao farmers' cause).

These key result areas were determined by the advocates in clear and specific measures at the start of the advocacy. It is indeed possible to define the targets and intended results of the advocacy, contrary to what some NGOs claim is difficult, if not impossible, to do.

4. The focus of NGO advocacy has either been the executive or legislative branches of government, while advocacy has kept away from engagement with judicial issues and the judicial branch.

Most of the 12 NGOs referred to in the 1997 study engaged the legislature on either the passage or change of policies on certain issues. For example, SIBOL advocated the passage of the Anti-Rape Act, Tambuyog worked hard on the passage of a Fisheries Code that is pro-small fisherfolks, and the anti-logging movement pressed for the passage of a law that would ban log cutting, whether clear-cut or selective.

Another big advocacy target focuses on the executive branch. One advocacy aimed for the reversal of an executive decision that favoured agri-industrialization over agrarian reform.

There seems to be limited engagement by NGOs with the judicial branch. It can only be surmised that NGOs have no familiarity with the courts system, a factor that insulates the judiciary from the public eye. The distance between the judicial system and the advocates is ironic because there are numerous issues that

touch on the judicial system and should merit advocacy. Victims of injustice are mostly poor people who have no access to courts, let alone to fair hearing and trial. The non-implementation or weak compliance with the laws results in gross injustice, most victims of which are the poor. There are many policy issues in which the major problem is the weakness in the implementation of laws and policies. In this regard, meaningful and relevant advocacy lies in the pursuit of policy implementation and in case of implementation failure, advocacy with the judiciary becomes crucial. One such case was the failure of agrarian reform among the Sumilao farm-

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ers in Bukidnon. With the executive decision that reversed the implementation of agrarian reform, the farmers and their allied advocates eventually dealt with the courts.

Another advocacy issue is consumers' rights. There is flagrant non-execution of policies regarding rights of consumers in spite of policies framed by the Department of Trade and Industry. And yet NGO advocates do not seem to take keenly to these issues. Another problematic area is the maladministration of criminal justice, which NGO advocates seem to have little engagement with as these cases appear less "ideological" or political.

The suggestion of the 1997 study was to build the capacity of NGOs to understand the judicial system and process and thereby enable themselves (NGOs) to deal with the judiciary. At the very least, the intervention of advocates into the judicial realm should challenge the courts' lack of transparency in their decisions as these affect the public in large measure.

5. Access to solid and data-based information is crucial to advocacy work.

In many instances, advocates have affirmed the importance of information as a tool for advocacy. The Freedom from Debt Coalition (FDC) believes that a successful information, education and support-generation campaign and effective negotiations and dealings with public institutions and policy makers are based upon solid and well-researched arguments on debt issues. The FDC had taken its issues to public officials' attention, to congress, the executive agencies and even to inter-

national bodies and the media because it had arguments that could withstand the queries and discourses of these agencies. The FDC spoke on the basis of well documented data and case studies. The data and well-woven analysis by advocates served as ammunition for advocacy work and were well received by policy makers.

Similarly, the Bukidnon Sumilao farmers' case on agrarian reform was supported by well-researched legal arguments prepared and documented by lawyers and by case studies and testimonies of farmers. Indeed, it is inevitable that research and advocacy go hand in hand. When advocates speak, they must do so with credibility, so that policy makers listen, that media pick up the issue and so that stakeholders respect the advocacy. Advocacy cannot endure with massive but hollow slogans.

6. The advocacy that creates impact is that which cuts across different tiers of policy decisions – local, national and international.

Amongst the 12 NGOs involved in the 1997 case studies, two organizations, namely, the FDC and the Sumilao agrarian reform farmers undertook advocacy in a comprehensive fashion. They took up their cause on all fronts, namely, at the national, local (provincial and city) and international levels. The issue on debt and debt management was effectively presented by FDC not only as a daily issue affecting everyone, but also as a national policy concern of decision makers and governments, as well as an issue that cuts between borrowers and lenders on the global front. The multi-tiered advocacy drew in the support and interest of a wide constituency, both inside and outside the country, and established FDC as a role model for advocates in other countries. A positive gain for FDC was that through a comprehensive, multi-tiered advocacy, it enlightened a wide audience and rallied wider support, thereby alerting policy makers to the advocacy issue.

Many other NGO advocates focused only on either the local or national level. For example, advocacy on aquatic reform and coastal resource management was limited to the municipality level, in spite of its potential to connect the issue at the national level. With such a narrow reach, the advocacy tended to miss out on raising the awareness of and mobilizing a good number of potential supporters.

It was also an observation of the 1997 advocacy study that most NGOs tended to generate enthusiasm only at the local level, failing to connect a local issue with a national or international campaign. It is important for advocacy to engender a transliteration of the issue at various levels. A positive example in this regard is the advocacy waged by the FDC, weaving the debt issue and launching the campaign across the national and sub-national levels of government, across legislative and executive, and even judicial branches of government, across national and local constituents and supporters, and across countries in the region and elsewhere.

Implications of the Lessons on Advocacy Strategies, Techniques & Implementation

It is important to lay out the advocacy strategy from the onset. Is the advocacy meant to campaign to a particular audience for the enactment of an environmental policy? Or to urge middle class professionals to take on the housing rights of the urban poor and the homeless? Is the campaign meant to urge target audiences to take direct action? Is it for information and education? Or is it to legislate a policy?

A clear strategy is half of the campaign and advocacy. Techniques and implementation constitute the other half of the work. The following elements are relevant to advocacy and campaign techniques.

1. Integration of information and solid research with advocacy work.

Data and research-based information are basic and extremely powerful tools in advocacy. Information includes a knowledge of the system and structure of the decision making process as well as of the key actors in decision making. In this regard, an understanding of the bureaucracy and how it works, for example, is important for non-government advocates. Timing of the decisions, calendar of policy activities and the informal processes of decision making are crucial to responsive interventions and negotiations. For example, an advocacy on the local budget would need to be grounded on the budget process, the calendar and schedule of budget preparation and deliberation and the individuals, agencies or units involved in the budget process.

Information and research on the issue are most vital to advocacy. In the case of the FDC, the success of its advocacy hinged on the knowledge and expertise of the advocates on debt issues, including debt management and the economics of borrowings. Enormous data and extensive case studies supported the arguments and stance of the FDC before the executive and the legislative branches and in international forums, thereby gaining credibility and sympathy. Similarly, the testimonies of farmers, their first-hand accounts of the costs and losses to their lives, their households and their gross bondage as a result of the conversion of agricultural to industrial lands and the non-implementation of agrarian reform gained worldwide solidarity and support for the farmers, won sympathy from allies and caught the attention of the public, thereby creating a significant impact and putting pressure on executive decision makers. The use of well-researched and documented data and information gained mileage for the advocates and put the government on the defensive.

In the legislative branch, lawmakers have always looked up to advocates who have strong support for their stance. One of these effective advocates was the Philippine Peasant Institute (PPI), which always spoke with confidence and credibility because of the hard work they put into research findings. Case studies on farmers, agricultural programs and surveys, including policy analysis of public documents, have become respectable sources and references for policy makers who need to expound on the issues of agriculture, agrarian reform and land use. The media have regularly quoted the PPI as an authority on land, agriculture and agrarian reform issues.

The imperative for NGO advocates is to do their homework seriously, namely, to establish their facts, to document and write up their cases and to put substance to their statements. The hard work of the NGOs in research, data-base and information, and documentation has always contributed to a sound and effective advocacy.

2. Engagement of academic and technical people in advocacy efforts.

Research, information and data base for advocacy purposes require the involvement of academics and people with technical expertise. The experts' knowl-

edge and skills on issues are essential to mount a framework for advocacy as well as to substantiate the arguments of the advocates. In the case of the advocacy on the Generic Drugs Act of 1988, medical doctors and pharmacologists were the initial architects of the policy advocacy on generics. Based on scientific studies and their practice, medical doctors staunchly argued in favor of the generics such that policy makers found it difficult to raise effective counterarguments. Similarly, lawyers and legal practitioners armed SIBOL advocates with legal arguments and cases in aid of the legislation on the Anti-Rape Act until it was passed as Republic Act 8353.

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Advocacy is a battle of arguments and counterarguments. It is not only a battle of beliefs and values but also of reasoning, logical coherence and evidence. Academics and experts could be of tremendous help here.

3. Working with people who matter in decision-making.

Official public officeholders make the crucial policy decisions. These individuals include the President, legislators in Congress, executive officials and justices of the courts.

However, there are also those in the “corridors of power” who do not necessarily occupy prestigious and high posts in the bureaucracy, but who, by their mandate and responsibility, are authorized to convene meetings, set the agenda and determine the timing and the procedures of decision making. Among these are the secretaries of legislative committees. Committee secretaries determine the preparedness of committees to meet and set committee agenda and schedules. They can “kill”, delay or “activate” an issue. They are largely responsible for determining who may participate and sit in committee hearings and deliberations. They make the “world go round” in the legislative exercise, and they set the direction of the decision process. In fact, the committee chairs depend on the secretaries for the agenda. It is therefore important for advocates to cultivate these people behind the powers. Rapport with these people is essential, and they should be treated as allies and supporters in advocacy work.

Legislators and other political players are difficult to categorize and label as either “conservative” or “progressive” or as “allies” or “foes”. Their stance changes depending on the issue. A legislator may support a progressive advocacy on one issue, but may fail to do so on another issue. For example, one senior legislator did not share the NGOs’ advocacy on the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), but was a staunch ally on housing and urban poor issues. Would the legislator be labeled as “progressive” and an ally or “a foe” in the advocacy? There is certainly no easy answer to this question. Nevertheless, legislators are considered strategic players in the advocacy effort, depending on their access to information, their understanding of the issue and their sentiments.

4. Making crucial decisions at the right time and opportunity.

Timing and opportunities are important for effective interventions in policy reform and advocacy. When the Department of Health (DOH) advocated the passage of the Generic Drugs Act of 1988 into Republic Act 8755, the leading advocates knew that post-EDSA was the momentous period for such policy reform. There was no other better timing than immediately after the EDSA people power – the new administration was open to reforms in government, people were expected to push for greater democratic space, and legislators were fired with enthusiasm from the EDSA event and so were inclined to support any policy that was pro-poor and pro-democracy. The advocates seized the opportunity for policy change and succeeded in mustering the support of crucial players.

Timing also meant quickness of response from the advocates to events and to media bulletins. This meant responding with timeliness and promptness to public information demand so that when issues such as the debt problem were publicly debated, the NGOs were quick to offer explanations or clarifications on the issue. The tit-for-tat approach was meant to offer a variety of perspectives on the issue and to generate favorable public opinion. Experience shows that NGOs tend to be slow in their response and to have complex, lengthy and sometimes incomprehensible positions on an issue. An underlying reason for such sluggishness is the practice of NGOs to wait for their leaders to issue the ‘official position’. But this prac-

tice then requires lengthy debates and deliberation, including bureaucratic procedures that have entrapped NGOs. The problem of designated advocacy officers to make decisions also contributes to a delayed response. Ironically, advocacy officers are not themselves empowered by their own organizations to make decisions regarding the advocacy issue.

As a result, the NGOs squander the opportunity to be heard, to be visible and to make a mark on the public consciousness.

5. Knowing work with media.

Advocacy seldom succeeds without the thoughtful involvement of media. Media and media relations are both a channel and a goal of advocacy. They are a channel because it is through media that an issue is fairly and effectively amplified and opinions are generated. Without media, information is not made accessible to the public and the articulation of an issue is hardly realized. Media institutions are a valuable resource to advocacy, and not only a tool for heralding an issue. It might even be helpful in constructing an effective advocacy design, strategy and techniques.

Knowing the value of media in advocacy, the advocates should consider media culture – its pace, work habits and demands, particularly with regard to the type of information needed and the style and manner by which an issue is presented.

6. Policy cycle as a guide for assessing future policy advocacy work.

NGOs have always been in search of a guide for measuring advocacy efforts and their outcomes. There have been long discussions and debates on advocacy and on what constitutes an effective measure of impact. Some believe advocacy can be measured; others however, express greater doubt.

In the future, it might be helpful for advocates to adopt the policy cycle as a guide for assessing advocacy and its phases. The policy cycle which reflects the stages and phases of policy is a comprehensive approach to looking at policy. The policy cycle refers to the various stages of policy, from the agenda setting to policy formulation in Congress until it is officially upheld by the Executive, and then on to policy implementation and policy evaluation and assessment. It might be useful to

consider setting targets based upon the stages of the policy cycle or to use the policy cycle as a benchmark for planning advocacy targets and strategies.

Conclusion

Campaign, advocacy and political activities by NGOs in the Philippines have a long and distinguished history of contributing to social reform and public policy. Advocacy continues to have an invaluable contribution to issues that are central to society and its well being. Advocacy also contributes to the formation of public opinion, critical thinking and public action. The cause of advocacy is clear and held highly among NGOs.

The challenge however lies in the formulation of advocacy strategy, techniques, organization and implementation. The strategy asks the questions: What is the cause? Why is the advocacy and campaign being undertaken? Who is the target audience? The techniques involve an array of activities which some NGOs are good at, while other techniques prove ineffective in delivering positive outcomes. These techniques need to be sorted out. An effective advocate is one who combines the traits of a thoughtful academic, researcher and expert along with the commitment of an activist. The lack of traits of one or the other results in a failure of advocacy.

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Finally, it must be stated in this paper that these experiences and lessons are limited to those organizations doing advocacy based upon the 1997 case study. There are other experiences which other organizations have learned in the course of their work and which we can learn from.

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