

Advocacy-Oriented Strategy
Background Thoughts for ICICI Foundation

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Introduction

There has been an interest in incorporating advocacy into ICICI Foundation strategy. Almost all the five partner organizations work with the government in some fashion. How much of these government interactions are translated into advocacy – reforming the system in which we are working, to make our programs more effective? The development sector complains constantly about policy roadblocks – outdated legislation, poorly thought out regulation, endemic corruption, politicians pandering to popular trends rather than sustainable solutions. While we do our best within these conditions, we can work simultaneously to fix these systemic problems at their root cause. The question we need to answer is how we best fit into this network of change: how can we collectively leverage the Foundation’s strengths for optimal impact in programs AND advocacy?

This background note is intended to give a high-level overview of the basics of advocacy, why it is important, and how best-in-class organizations approach the topic. Its secondary objective is to showcase various options for structuring an advocacy-oriented organization backed up by programming, to initiate a discussion on what model would best suit the Foundation to most effectively accomplish both its project and advocacy goals.

Why advocate?

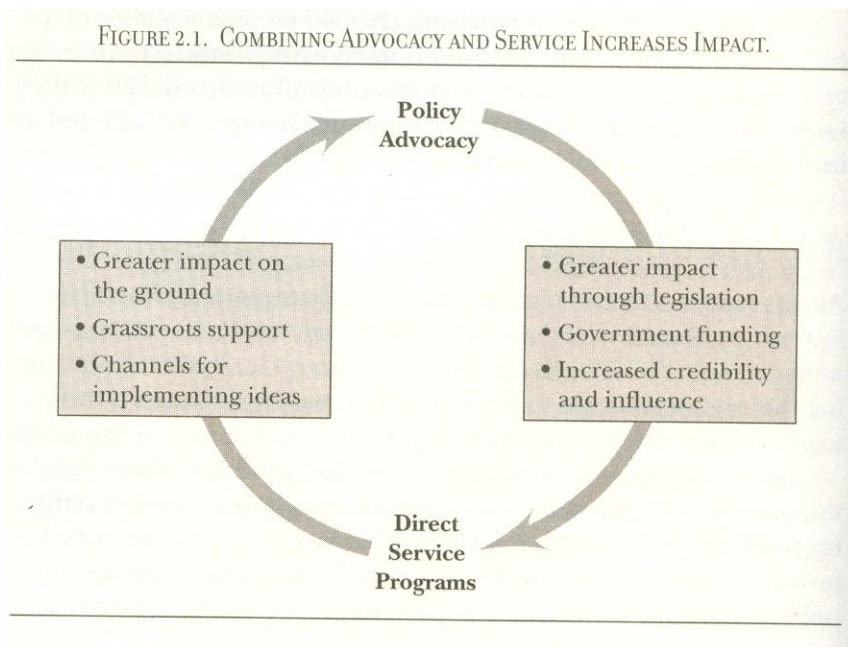
“If you’re not at the table, you’re on the table.”¹

Policy reform, civic engagement, lobbying, educating, shaping public opinion. These are all terms that have been used to describe the basic process of advocacy, defined as “the pursuit of influencing outcomes – including public-policy and resource allocation decisions within political, economic, and social systems and institutions – that directly affect people’s lives” (Cohen et al 2001, 7-8).

¹ From the Center for Lobbying in the Public Interest: Why Advocacy? <http://www.clpi.org/why-advocacy>. (accessed 27/1/09)

The obvious reason to engage in advocacy is the common understanding that governments worldwide are not perfect, and require a continuous process of reforms and re-writes to improve their effectiveness. Non-governmental organizations are in an excellent position to look at policy from an outside perspective and provide advice on how to improve it. They can also serve as a key link between the government and its populace, mobilizing communities to push for ever better performance by their elected officials.

According to *Forces for Good: The Six Practices of High-Impact Nonprofits* (2008), most social sector organizations focus on either direct service/programming or advocacy efforts to effect social change. However, the authors find that the organizations with the most overall impact combine the two, employing a philosophy they term the “virtuous cycle”:



A drawback of this approach is the danger of diluting expertise in the respective fields of advocacy and service provision, suggesting that the benefits of putting the two in close quarters to inform each other are offset by the deprioritization of each as a targeted strategy. But the evidence suggests that some structure of combination, whether intra-organization or inter-organization, is critical to accelerating impact on social issues.

The Center for Lobbying in the Public Interest details a further set of reasons beyond “advocacy for advocacy’s sake” that an organization should get involved in shaping public policy:

- Raise awareness of your mission
- Mobilize members, volunteers, donors and board
- Attract favorable media attention
- Establish and expand government investment in important social programs
- Reform laws and regulations that govern the operation and evaluation of your programs
- Confer benefits far beyond that of any one direct service program

Types of advocacy

A brief scan of organizations that engage in advocacy reveals a variety of different styles, goals and target audiences. Many focus on advocacy or lobbying in the traditional sense, or working with citizens to leverage their power as voters. Others argue that increasing information flow to lawmakers is the key, particularly in the Indian context, because officials have little understanding of the policies on which they vote. Still others claim that the bottleneck to be addressed is not policy reform, but implementation of the laws that are already on the books. In general, two broad styles of advocacy work can be characterized as “direct advocacy”, aimed at policymakers, and “civic engagement”, or getting the public involved in policy reform (Rees 1998).

Direct advocacy tends to be the preferred approach among many effective advocacy organizations (Rees 1998). These organizations develop strategies to influence policymakers at their pressure points, whether on or off the voting floor. Two broad categories of direct advocacy strategies appear to be relevant in the Indian context:

Informing and enabling policymakers. Often politicians and bureaucrats make poor decisions not because they are corrupt or inept, but simply because they do not have the information or capacity at their fingertips to make effective changes. In the US,

Congresspersons retrieve information on policy issues from the government's Congressional Research Service, but no such facility exists in India's government. Even in the US, advocacy organizations such as the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities supplement the CRS by analyzing government data to inform lawmakers of the impacts of legislative decisions (Crutchfield and Grant 2008, Rees 1998). Within India, the Center for Policy Research has spearheaded the PRS Legislative Research initiative, which produces legislative summary documents to help Parliament cast more transparent and better informed votes². Other organizations, such as Jaanagraha, work to improve the systems that surround politicians, from technology systems to staff capacity to local body structures. By filling gaps in the system infrastructure, these organizations strive to enhance the effectiveness of the officials who function within it³.

Well-connected leadership. Ex-government officials with legislative experience and people with personal connections to local lawmakers are among the most important staff an advocacy organization can hire. Recruiting these people gives the organization a leg-up over other groups that must build relationships or legislative expertise from the ground up. The highly esteemed Concord Coalition in the US was founded by two former senators and is directed by the former minority staff director of the House Budget Committee (Rees 1998), equipping the organization with extensive knowledge of the legislative system. Jaanagraha's charismatic head, Ramesh Ramanathan, is widely known to have the ear of the government, which contributes heavily to the organization's impact. Our own IFMR ecosystem has made inroads to policy reform through personal connections, with Dr. Nachiket Mor's appointment to the central government's High Powered Expert Committee to inform urban infrastructure investment policy.

Campaign contributions. Many advocacy groups in the US use official campaign contributions as a lever to influence policymakers. According to Charles Lewis of the Center for Public Integrity, congressmen tend vote for the issues favored by their contributors - industry, non-profit or individual - unless it is particularly harmful to their

² For more information visit the PRS website. <http://www.prsindia.org/aboutus.htm> (accessed 27/1/09)

³ For more information visit the Jaanagraha website. <http://janaanagraha.org/node/2048> (accessed 27/1/09)

reputation as a local representative (Bernstein 1998). Unfortunately there is no formal mechanism for contributing to electoral campaigns in the Indian political system, so this is not a viable option for advocacy organizations in the country.

Civic engagement, or “individual and collective actions...to identify and address issues of public concern,”⁴ is a more collective form of policy reform, leveraging the political will of citizens with voting power. Though evidence suggests that organizations may have more impact by applying direct pressure on politicians than rallying civil society to do so, few organizations ignore this field entirely. Moreover, many organizations focus solely on mobilizing the public to actively take part in the democratic process, and an increasing number of these groups are beginning to emerge in India. As with direct advocacy, civic engagement comes in more than one variety.

Voter education and mobilization. Elected officials depend on votes to maintain their positions in government, so voting citizens are a natural point of great influence. Campaigns to inform voters of how their representatives vote on issues relevant to them, and to mobilize citizens to get to their voting booths during elections, are key activities performed by high-impact organizations. Prominent US organizations from the Sierra Club to the American Association for Retired Persons (AARP) focus on informing their membership of the way their representatives vote on pertinent issues (Rees 1998). A new movement of organizations such as Jaago Re⁵ is starting to promote voter mobilization in India, using innovative techniques such as multimedia to encourage youth citizens to engage in the democratic process.

Public ad campaigns. Shaping public opinion, while generally perceived to be more of an uphill battle than direct advocacy or responsiveness to existing voter views (Rees 1998), is the sole focus of many prominent advocacy organizations. Public ad campaigns, leveraging advertising space, radio and TV bulletins, oped articles and other forms of

⁴As defined by Michael Delli Carpini, Director, Public Policy, The Pew Charitable Trusts. Quoted by the American Psychological Association. <http://www.apa.org/ed/slce/civicengagement.html> (accessed 27/1/09)

⁵ Jaago Re is engaged in the “Jaago Re! One Billion Votes” campaign to register citizens to vote in 35 cities across the nation. For more information visit <http://www.jaagore.com/main.php> (accessed 28/1/09)

mass media to generate buzz about political issues, have been seen to have dramatic influence on voter opinion and policy outcomes. The Centre for Science and Environment (CSE), for example, has launched several large media campaigns to advocate for environmental causes, including one that saw the conversion of Delhi autos and busses from diesel to compressed natural gas (CNG) in 2002 (Menon 2005).

Aggregating voter opinion. Campaigns to aggregate voter opinion through petitions, protests and public interest litigation are also effective means of applying political pressure, and can have the spillover effect of generating media buzz. The Citizen consumer and civic Action Group (CAG), for example, has had success in its consumer and environmental protection campaigns as a result of its petitions and public interest litigation. The advent of new media has given an even bigger boost to this strategy. MoveOn.org, which promotes left-wing initiatives through online petitions, has a member base of 3.2 million across the United States; PetitionOnline.com, a nonpartisan website, has collected over 77 million signatures.

Strategic frameworks for advocacy organizations

In addition to differences in advocacy type, organizations employ a variety of organizational frameworks, which determine how they obtain the information that informs their advocacy and how they relate to their target groups. Each has its pros and cons, and is rooted in an underlying philosophy on high-impact advocacy and its relationship with program-based work.

Issue-centric structure: organizations that engage in both programs and advocacy, combining the two within subject focus areas. These organizations structure themselves along pillars of social issues, and within each pillar they perform the necessary service provision and advocacy activities necessary to advance progress on that issue. The major benefit to this approach is that programming and advocacy in each focus area tend to be strongly interconnected. A disadvantage is that they require both program expertise and advocacy expertise to be staffed in each focus area.

Toxic Links, an environmental group that has benchmarked India environmental debates, is one organization that has taken this approach, engaging in both research and advocacy efforts along the issue areas of Toxics-Free Healthcare, Communities and Waste, Clean Industry, and Chemicals and Health. The Citizen consumer and civic Action Group also parses itself out into Consumer Protection, Environment Protection, and Good Governance verticals, using its research to inform advocacy campaigns within each. The Sierra Club and Center on Budget and Policy Priorities take similar approaches.

Issue + advocacy structure: organizations that position advocacy as one of their key strategic pillars. As opposed to advocacy as an activity within a broader focus area, this approach lends a stronger positioning to advocacy work, setting it apart as a social issue in its own right that must be dealt with head-on. The advantages are that this enhances brand presence as an advocacy organization and consolidates advocacy efforts into a one-stop shop within the organization that all other departments can go to for expertise. The disadvantage is that it distances the advocates from the service providers to some extent, limiting the amount of coordination they can have on any particular issue area.

Many exemplary organizations employ this structure to frontline their advocacy efforts. The mammoth NGO Oxfam positions itself in different ways. Oxfam International has five pillars, three of which have to do with advocacy – Development, Emergencies, Campaigning, Advocacy, and Policy Research – clearly positioning itself as an integrated service and advocacy organization. Their India counterpart, Oxfam India, takes a slightly more service-oriented approach, with focus areas in Livelihoods, Gender, Essential Services, Humanitarian Work and Campaigning. Without delving into the details of national vs. global marketing strategies, it is safe to say that both focus on both service programs and advocacy, with the international organization taking a slightly stronger bent towards policy change.

The Azim Premji Foundation, committed to quality universal education, also puts a heavy emphasis on advocacy. Its three main initiatives are Experiments on the Ground (in a

variety of education reform focus areas), Systemic Change Interventions, and Advocacy. The focus areas for the advocacy team are closely related to its Experiment and Systemic Change projects⁶. The bias towards defining separate advocacy and service areas is maintained in heavily advocacy-focused organizations - even Prayas Energy Group (PEG), which focuses on advocacy in the public interest, separates itself into “Regulation and Restructuring, Policy Analysis & Advocacy, and Energy for Development” themes (PEG website)⁷.

Target-centric structure: organizations that divide work by target audience. These organizations structure their teams by the external audiences they work with or seek to influence – government, industry, and civil society. Direct advocacy in these organizations usually falls within the government vertical in this approach, and civic engagement into the civil society vertical, but not always. This can be an optimal approach for staffing, as employees with expertise and contacts for working with various facets of the system can be housed within each group for the maximum targeted impact on a sector. A disadvantage is that subject expertise in social areas becomes diluted, as the expertise developed is in sectors of society to target, as opposed to social issues to pursue.

The Consultative Group to Assist the Poor (CGAP) splits its work up in this manner, focusing on the Microfinance Industry, Donors & Investors, and Government & Policy. CGAP’s outputs and expertise to advise each of these sectors has been honed and perfected as a result of this structure.

Advocacy-centric structure: advocacy-only organizations, partnering with service-only organizations to support their advocacy. These organizations tend to be few and far

⁶ While closely related, Azim Premji Foundation’s program interventions and advocacy focus areas are not exactly parallel. Experimentation areas are examination-led reforms, teacher preparation and support, technology, education management, and other interventions. Advocacy projects overlap with the first three, but exclude education management and include teacher pupil ratio and elementary education financing. This implies a focus on but not an obsession with project-based advocacy or advocacy-led programming. For more information visit <http://azimpremijifoundation.org/html/initiatives.htm> (accessed 28/1/09)

⁷ For more on PEG’s approach visit http://prayaspune.org/peg/energy_home.php (accessed 29/1/09)

between; our analysis of best-in-class organizations did not reveal any organizations that focused *purely* on advocacy, and relied on other organizations to provide the research and program-based evidence to fuel their advocacy issues. The lesson here seems to be that some form of in-house evidence gathering is the method to success.

How to advocate

The following is a laundry list of practices key to effective advocacy, derived mainly from Susan Rees' analysis of the activities of high-profile American advocacy groups (1998) and adapted to be more relevant for the Indian policy context. Some of these suggestions are innate to the advocacy types and organizational frameworks described in the above sections; the idea would be to incorporate as many from the list into an organization's chosen strategy. This list is not exhaustive and is best taken as a set of "necessary but not sufficient" elements of an effective policy reform organization.

Initial orientation

1. Focus on 1 or 2 top policy priorities
2. Employ veterans of government and/or leaders with connections to government
3. Have presence in a relevant policy geography, i.e. Delhi for central government advocacy, state capitals for state level advocacy, etc.
4. Maintain sub-national chapters to affect local policy, facilitate citizen/volunteer training and activities
5. Train on everything – employees and volunteers should be generalists
6. Know the legislative process and players⁸

Partnerships and Interactions

7. Work in coalitions, to amplify voice as well as share costs⁹. Work with "strange bedfellows" to further amplify impact
8. Get high-profile organizations to take on your issue

⁸ Also derived from Center for Lobbying in the Public Interest: Advocacy Tactics <http://www.cipi.org/nuts-a-bolts/advocacy-tactics> (accessed 28/1/09)

⁹ Ibid.

9. Reach out to multiple political parties
10. Get citizens involved by creating a membership to the organization, and incorporating members' opinions into direct advocacy

Practice

11. Unify grassroots action around themes with a national message
12. Serve as a source of credible, analytic, and timely information
13. Educate voters on how their representatives vote on issues
14. Publicize issue, demand candidates' positions during election campaigns
15. Involve policymakers with others on study commissions that make policy recommendations

Conclusion

While organizations vary in their advocacy focus and strategic frameworks, there are a number of best practices among high-functioning policy groups in India and abroad that can be employed by any advocacy organization. The ICICI Foundation has the advantage of starting with a relatively clean slate for advocacy, and therefore having the opportunity to carefully choose a philosophy and structure that will leverage its existing strengths to accelerate policy reform. Building off a solid foundation of project and research-based evidence generated by its partners, and armed with a well thought-out strategy for advocacy initiatives, the ICICI Foundation will be a frontrunning player in the advocacy domain pan-India.

Citations

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Summary of Best-in-Class Advocacy Organizations¹⁰

India-specific

PRS Legislative Services: www.prsindia.org

Jaanagraha: www.janaagraha.org

Citizen consumer and civic Action Group (CAG): www.cag.org.in

Centre for Science and Environment (CSE): www.cseindia.org

Toxic Links: www.toxiclink.org

Oxfam India: www.oxfamindia.org

Azim Premji Foundation: www.azimpremjifoundation.org

Prayas Energy Group (PEG): www.prayasenergy.org/peg/energy_home.php

US/International

Center on Budget and Policy Priorities: www.cbpp.org

Concord Coalition: www.concordcoalition.org

Sierra Club: www.sierraclub.org

American Association of Retired Persons (AARP): www.aarp.org

MoveOn.org: www.moveon.org

PetitionOnline.org: www.petitiononline.org

Oxfam International: www.oxfam.org

¹⁰ List developed from compilations of high-impact advocacy organizations by Rees (1998) and Crutchfield and Grant (2008), survey of CDF researchers, and personal analysis. Organizations that did not engage in proactive measures of advocacy, as defined in this paper, were excluded from analysis.