



EC/UNFPA INITIATIVE FOR REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH IN ASIA



Dealing With Advocacy

A Practical Guide



ComNet co-ordinated by the German Foundation
for World Population (DSW)

DSW

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RHI Dealing with Advocacy – A Practical Guide

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1. What is Advocacy?

Few countries in the world, if any, guarantee every individual access to the information and the means to exercise their reproductive rights to a level that has been agreed upon at numerous international conferences.

Advocacy – in the field of reproductive health and rights – can be defined as the process that leads to broader access of more people to quality reproductive health services, and that facilitates a more complete self-determination of every individual in matters of sexuality and reproduction.

Advocacy is geared towards change: change in personal behaviour and attitude, change in the political and public debate, institutional change and legal change. It is a process that involves all levels of society, since reproductive choices and possibilities affect everybody.

A top-down model will not work in this area, because individuals make reproductive choices in their private lives. However, governments and institutions can limit reproductive choices of individuals severely by regulating access to services and information.

Advocacy is not the same as Information, Education and Communication (IEC) but often advocacy and IEC go together. For instance: in order to change regulations that limit the access of young or unmarried people to contraceptive services, the public, the policy makers and the politicians need to be informed and educated on the dangers of STDs and unwanted pregnancies for young people. Here, IEC is a precondition for advocacy to change laws and regulations.

Advocacy is a process that requires civil courage: the courage to speak out, to stand up, to generate and stir debate and controversy and – more often than not – to oppose the powers that be.

Sometimes it looks as if the task of changing the current situation is too much for any group of people. In fact, a dedicated and committed group of people is the only entity that will ever change anything anywhere.

2. Why do NGOs need Advocacy?

NGOs working in the field of reproductive health and rights tend to be very good at their core business: providing services. However, providing quality services without advocacy has its limitations. Few NGOs can provide structural solutions in a situation, where access and services are limited by law or regulations. Sometimes, governments and state institutions let NGOs do the work that is seen as controversial, as long as the NGOs do so in silence. That provides a solution for individuals that find their way to the NGO services, but it does not change the public debate and forces the NGOs and their clients to operate in an atmosphere of secrecy.

Another limitation of services without advocacy is that NGOs cannot capitalise on the experiences of their clients. NGOs that are providing services know the needs and desires of their clients and should be able to advise policy makers accordingly.

Many NGOs have experienced that there is a certain tension between service provision and advocacy. Advocacy can bring you into the spotlight and into the heart of controversy. That may scare off potential clients. If the government provides funds for the provision of services, it might seem difficult to criticise that same government publicly.

However, more than anybody else, NGOs are able to show what limitations do to people, what the results of certain policies are in the lives of people, and what could be done to empower people to make responsible and informed choices. Using their expertise in the public debate and in the process of law-making is not only a great opportunity to make their organisation known and respected; it is also a responsibility towards their current and future clients.

3. Advocacy as a Process

A successful advocacy campaign is based upon the following components:

- a. Strategy
- b. Building Bridges
- c. Networking
- d. Forming Coalitions
- e. Taking Concrete Action
- f. Developing Materials
- g. Breaking the Silence

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Without a strategy, people easily get disappointed because it is hard to measure progress if there is no formulated goal and a plan to achieve that goal. Without substantial support an NGO might easily be isolated and ignored. Without public debate, politicians and policy makers might put aside the NGO agenda as irrelevant.

ad.a. Strategy

For an advocacy campaign, identifying your goal is of utmost importance. Progress in the area of reproductive health and reproductive rights is all too often a matter of small steps. But not all small steps are going in the right direction. For instance: in a situation, where young unmarried people have no access to contraceptive services, it might seem like progress when access is allowed with parental consent. However, this might exclude the majority of young people, while it seems as if the problem is solved.

The strategy for your campaign should contain the goals you want to achieve. For instance: changing public attitude, sensitising policy makers and politicians, altering the rules, amending the laws etc.

A strategy plan should also contain the steps needed towards achieving your goal. Almost always, it is important

to first and foremost create public support for your goals. It is the basis upon which your campaign stands. There are examples of high placed authorities of good will, which tried to change the rules without a public debate. The temptation of making big steps forward is – of course – great, but the progress will seldom last. Ending harmful but deeply rooted practices, for instance, is a process that needs the whole community to be involved, in order to be successful. Making harmful practices illegal overnight, rarely makes the situation better and makes public debate more difficult.

ad.b. Building Bridges

Building bridges means finding ways to gather as many people and organisations in support of your goal as possible. It is not necessary to agree on everything, in order to co-operate in achieving a concrete goal. Many reproductive health and rights issues can be considered from different angles. Some might want to see them primarily as health issues, while others see them as human rights issues. That is a difference that requires informal discussions and exchanging views, but it should not withhold you from co-operating to achieve change. Some might want to emphasise the importance of reproductive rights in the process of empowering women, while others see it as a basic right for all individuals. Again, these are great issues to discuss, but no reason not to join forces for the better. Many people (and organisations) consider reproductive health services for young and unmarried people or abortion services as “harm reduction”, more than as rights for every individual. Nevertheless, they still might be on your side in campaigning for access to services.

Make sure, that all the partners in a campaign understand that this co-operation is about this specific goal and does not mean that you are tied forever on every issue. Respect different angles and arguments. Be pragmatic on who is going to advocate your issue where. A conservative medical board might be more easily convinced by a retired and well-respected medical doctor, than by a feminist action group.

ad.c. Networking

Networking is easy, time consuming and fun. It simply means going to the places and occasions, where you can find out who the actors are in the particular field that you want to approach in your campaign. It is also about making yourself and your organisation known to all the possible actors: colleagues, NGOs, medical organisations, lawyers, teachers, politicians, policy makers, journalists, influential community leaders etc. It enables you to find out what the current debate is about, what the priorities of other organisations are, who your potential partners are. Most countries have an active reproductive rights movement, which contains many different organisations and individuals. Make sure that you and your organisation are firmly rooted in that movement. They have to get to know and respect you before they will consider co-operating with you.

ad.d. Forming Coalitions

The key to a successful coalition is equality and respect. In a successful coalition, small and big groups, moderate and radical groups work together taking advantage of each other's strengths, without ignoring differences. A small NGO can sometimes be more flexible, but might have a limited reach. A big NGO might have a greater impact, but can be suffering from a bureaucratic structure, that does not easily adjust to new developments. Radical groups can play a role in paving the way for more 'middle-of-the-road' NGOs.

Problems in coalitions are often caused by a lack of equality. One or two of the groups take all the credit for the results, for instance, or one organisation seems to appear in the media all the time without mentioning the others. In many countries, there is a certain level of competition between NGOs, competition with regards to donors, towards government money or even competition in getting clients. It might help to discuss this openly and to try to make sure that every NGO gets something out of the coalition. Giving credit, where credit is due, helps a lot; trying to put your organisation at the forefront all the time does the opposite. Working together

in a (temporary) coalition has no doubt numerous advantages if you can make it work. The broader the coalition, the greater the impact it will have.

It is important to agree upon the basic rules of working together at the beginning of a campaign. Firstly, you should answer the following questions:

- **What decisions should be made by all the groups and which can be made in working groups?**
- **Who are spokespersons of the coalition and what can they say on behalf of all groups?**
- **What should be left to the organisations to speak on individually?**
- **How often should the whole group meet?**
- **How to make sure that not only the already known organisations are going to be interviewed and quoted in the media?**
- **What are the limits in which the different groups can work together?**

ad.e. Taking Concrete Action

Concrete action is needed for each advocacy campaign, as well as a time schedule. For instance: a coalition can decide to spend a year at making condoms more easily accessible for young people. That requires changing the rules and carrying out a public awareness campaign. Different groups can develop different activities under the same umbrella. At the end, there can be a joint event of all the groups. All groups can do what they are good at and give the campaign a place in their annual plan. Youth groups can start distributing condoms at youth events, teachers can start a discussion in schools, the family planning groups can start a campaign to get more young clients, lawyers can formulate alternative laws and present them to politicians. Media can be used to emphasise the problems of young people in the area of sexuality and reproductive health.

It can be very useful to have advocacy/media training at the start of the campaign. That allows you to develop arguments together, to get more confident in public performances, while you also get to know each other better in an informal setting.

ad.f. Developing Materials

Advocacy materials can be developed in many different forms. A common logo for all the groups is a good idea, it ties the various activities and angles together for a common goal. A great advocacy tool – if you can afford it – is an opinion poll at the start of the campaign. Knowing what people think about the issue, the level of information etc. enables you to design advocacy materials for specific groups and to tackle specific arguments. Also, often you will find out that the views of common people on reproductive health and rights are more enlightened, than politicians and policy makers tend to think. Opinion polls can provide you with very convincing arguments for policy makers.

Advocacy materials should be designed to have a maximum impact, in other words, as many people as possible should see them during the campaign. It is very important to test advocacy materials. There are too many examples of advocacy materials that contained a message, which was misunderstood by the public with all kinds of negative results. An infamous example: when the HIV/AIDS pandemic broke out, many countries started huge information campaigns, using billboard posters. Many of these posters used photographs of terminally ill patients, suffering, in pain and terribly skinny. Firstly, fear is not the most effective drive for behaviour change; more importantly, these posters had a very dramatic effect: many people concluded from the posters, that you could easily identify someone with HIV/AIDS and that avoiding sex with them would free you from the danger of getting infected. Sex with a healthy looking person was thus considered safe.

A press package should be made for every advocacy campaign, as well as a package with background information for politicians and policy makers.

ad.g. Breaking the Silence

Advocacy is about breaking the silence on issues, which affect everybody but are seldom discussed in public. To bring stories of women and men, who are suffering as a result of the lack of reproductive choice into the public debate, is one of the most powerful advocacy tools you can use. In many countries, the majority of the public knows that, for instance, young people are sexually active and in need of protection and information, but in the public debate the assumption, that sex before marriage does not exist, remains. It takes the testimonies of young people in one form or another to make visible what everybody already knows and to bring politicians and policy makers to act accordingly.

Scientific research and experience show that an informed public supports reproductive health, whereas an uninformed public is more sensitive to myths and ideology.

4. Opposition

It is no secret that most opposition to reproductive rights and services come from two sources: religious groups and patriarchal views on the role of women.

Both groups use arguments that sound moral, ethical and are highly theoretical. They do not take into account the reality of today's world and they do not trust individuals to be able to make responsible choices. On occasion, they end up promoting rules and regulations that directly affect the health of people.

The reproductive health and rights movement contributes to the improvement of public health, based upon human rights, a moral and ethical concept. The reality of women's lives and the reality of the lives of young people are the starting point for their advocacy activities.

In the debate it is important to stay close to the reality of people's lives. Advocacy materials (and interviews) should always contain a description of the current situation:

how many people are suffering from the lack of services you promote, what is the result of the lack of services, individual stories, testimonies etc. If you can show, that your proposals will save the lives of women and young people or improve their health, you make it very difficult for your opponents to appear reasonable.



5. Integrating Advocacy into your Work

Besides advocacy campaigns with formulated goals, NGOs should also carry out advocacy on a daily basis. This means staying in contact with policy makers and politicians, informing them on the work you are doing, providing them with information that they can use in policy- and law-making.

These advocacy activities can also be geared at the implementation of international agreements and national laws. Many countries support the Cairo Programme of Action, though very few are implementing it to its full extent. Sometimes, national laws are not in line with international treaties and in many countries practices do not realise what the law guarantees.

Building a position as an expert organisation in the area of reproductive health and rights is important for advocacy activities. It means making yourself heard and seen in every debate that goes on in this area.

Finally, advocacy should involve everyone in your organisation. Dedicated personnel, board members and clients are the best advocates for your case that you can wish for. Advocacy takes place everywhere; at the smallest community meeting and in the national parliament. At social gatherings and at formal conferences. Satisfied clients are the best advertisement for your organisation, as they recommend it to others.

It is important to have good advocacy materials and to use your tools effectively. At the end of the day however, the dedication and commitment of individuals is decisive in realising advocacy goals.

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