Four Steps to Public Health Advocacy Success:

A Companion to GHAI’s Advocacy Action Guide
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Acknowledgements

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About the Global Health Advocacy Incubator

The Global Health Advocacy Incubator (GHAI) improves health at scale by changing policies, expanding funding for public health and building advocacy movements to tackle public health challenges and reduce health disparities worldwide.
Introduction

This paper discusses how advocates — particularly civil society advocates — can engage in advocacy more effectively and intentionally. It is a companion to the Global Health Advocacy Incubator’s (GHAI’s) *Advocacy Action Guide*, which is a practical, hands-on learning resource for civil society advocates. It is drawn from GHAI’s experience supporting more than 260 organizations in 60-plus countries across diverse political contexts to plan and execute winning policy advocacy campaigns on a range of public health issues.

The Practice of Advocacy

Public health advocacy is an interdisciplinary field, drawing upon various strategies and tactics for effective persuasion and influence of key decision-makers and stakeholders that can improve public health outcomes. Successful advocacy campaigns often draw on a variety of expertise:

1. **Legal**: Legal analysis and expertise is essential for identifying gaps in current policies, ensuring that new policies are effective and enforceable or implementable and helping governments to defend them.¹

2. **Research**: Research and data — including local evidence — support policy development and are used to make the case for change to decision-makers. Evidence should also be explained, or “translated,” to be more easily understood by decision-makers and the public.

3. **Communications**: Communicators create media environments that enable policy change and help develop and execute strategies to build public and decision-maker support for health policies.

4. **Decision-maker engagement**: Advocates educate and persuade government decision-makers on the issues, bring technical experts and key stakeholders to the table and cultivate champions who help pass and implement policies.

5. **Monitoring and evaluation**: Monitoring and evaluation is vital at every step of the advocacy process for understanding and analyzing barriers to advocacy plans and making strategic adjustments, improving coordination and providing a framework for sharing results.

Every advocacy campaign will look slightly different as advocates tailor global best practices to their local circumstances. In 2023, GHAI consulted our teams in 16 countries across the Americas, Africa, Asia, Europe and the Pacific, along with 7 civil society partners, to review our advocacy approach and distill the most important lessons from their campaigns. Collectively, they identified elements that correspond to four broad campaign phases: Analyze, Collaborate and Plan, Advocate and Sustain.² These phases may overlap and repeat, but they build off of each other.
Analyze

Policy change begins with evidence and intelligence gathering. Advocates must identify relevant stakeholders and potential partners, working with them to develop policy objectives based on research, best practices, political feasibility and policy impact. Steps in this phase include creating a landscape analysis, setting policy objectives and political mapping.

The analysis conducted during this phase will need to be reassessed as the campaign evolves, such as when governments or the media environment change.

1. **Conduct a landscape analysis:** A landscape analysis is a broad overview of the context in which the policy advocacy will be conducted. A landscape analysis includes but is not limited to the country’s legal, political, policy and media environments and stakeholders. This information helps define policy objectives, evaluate which of those options are feasible and determine how to achieve them. Policy change is based on legal systems, frameworks and structures that guide and direct government. Understanding these processes and the actors involved is vital to ensuring the most expedient and effective policy pathways.

2. **Set policy objectives:** A policy objective is the result an organization or coalition wants to achieve within a foreseeable timeframe and with available resources. Achieving an overarching policy goal usually requires a series of strategic and interrelated policy objectives. The objective describes the changes advocates want to see and helps to identify the actions needed to deliver that change. Policy objectives should be informed by the landscape analysis and be SMART: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound.

3. **Assess the policy decision-making pathway:** A policy decision-making pathway uses the landscape analysis and policy objectives to focus advocacy on a specific policy pathway. The pathway refers to the steps involved in formulating policies within governmental or structures. It typically includes problem identification, agenda setting, policy formulation, policy instrument identification, adoption, implementation and evaluation. Advocates can use the pathway to map out the relevant policy decision-makers, their influencers and opportunities for engagement, including power dynamics, decision-making processes and potential allies or opponents.
Collaborate and Plan

In GHAI’s 2023 consultation with staff and partners, “partnerships” was ranked as the most important element of an advocacy campaign. Lasting advocacy success requires coalitions and movements and is unlikely to be achieved by a single individual or organization.

The assessment of the legal, policy and media landscapes identifies the policies that must be changed, as well as the necessary decision-makers and the ways to reach them. Once the analysis is done, it is time to collaborate with partners to build a comprehensive and detailed strategic advocacy plan based on this information. The steps in this phase include building partnerships and champions, developing a strategic plan and planning a communications campaign.

4. **Build partnerships and champions:** Building partnerships and champions is key to any successful campaign. Partnerships can include coalitions of organizations and individuals that come together for a period of time to collaborate and focus efforts to achieve changes in policy, law, programs or funding for a particular issue. Working with partners and in coalitions brings together different expertise and influence – making it easier to carry out a range of advocacy activities and engage and mobilize a broader set of decision-makers.

5. **Develop a strategic plan:** One of the most important stages of an advocacy campaign is the development of a strategic plan. A strategic plan outlines the strategies for reaching the decision-makers identified in the decision-making pathway to help deliver the policy objectives. The plan describes advocacy activities and how, by and with whom and when they should happen. Like the landscape analysis, it is a living document that should be updated based on external factors and ongoing evaluation of the effectiveness of the current approach.

6. **Develop a communications plan:** Communications is key to ensuring there is an enabling environment for policy change and any successful advocacy campaign requires an effective communications plan. The most important principle of an effective communications plan is to identify the audience and stakeholders, so the materials, messages and tools can be tailored to fit audience needs. The components of the plan should include a communications objective, target audience, key messages, preferred messengers, communications channels and a communications action plan. Communications keeps an issue visible and understood, creates awareness and urgency around the issue, exposes decision-makers and the public to relevant evidence, educates the audience on solutions to policy challenges and inspires the public and decision-makers to take action.
After analyzing the landscape, collaborating with stakeholders and developing a strategic advocacy and communications plan, it is time to begin direct advocacy. As described above, advocacy is a set of strategic, focused actions directed at decision-makers in support of a specific policy issue. Advocacy should always be locally-led and evidence-based to ensure that it is advancing the most effective policy solutions and that advocates are seen as credible partners. The steps included in this phase include influencing decision-makers, building public support and countering opposition.

7. **Influence decision-makers:** Advocacy requires engaging relevant decision-makers and strategic influencers to educate them about the issue and/or persuade them to support a policy objective. Examples of actions requested of policymakers include support for specific policy language or systems that need to be put in place, outreach to other decision-makers and follow-up on the implementation of existing policies. All engagement with decision-makers should be well prepared and delivered and followed up on by messengers they respect. Advocates should be aware of any lobbying restrictions that may apply.

8. **Build public support:** Building public support is often a key factor in influencing decision-makers and getting them to take action. For many issues, change depends on the weight of public demand and approval. Real public support is when people understand the issue and are willing to be vocal about the importance of policy change in addressing it, confirming that the issue is important and in the public interest. Public support also indicates that a community has taken ownership of the issue, making it more likely that they will continue to push for it over the long term and support implementation and accountability.

9. **Counter opposition:** Understanding, monitoring and countering opposition is critical to ensuring a campaign is effective and not undermined by others. The strategic advocacy plan should include a section outlining risks to the campaign, featuring clearly identified actors who would either not agree with the policy objective or actively work against it — the “opposition.” In many instances, the opposition is well resourced and able to move swiftly to undermine or discredit advocacy efforts. Good planning and proactive strategies can help to preempt some of their strategies. Opponents often deploy a wide range of tactics, practices and arguments to weaken or prevent advances in healthy policies at the international, national and sub-national levels. Countering opposition means not only developing responses to their arguments but being proactive with media and decision-makers to expose their opposition and their role in creating the problem and opposing solutions.
Sustain

Advocacy campaigns do not end when a policy has been enacted or strengthened. To ensure that the policy achieves the expected long-term impact of improved health outcomes, it is critical to continue advocating for strong implementation, enforcement and institutionalization; monitor progress; and support public health budgets.

10. **Monitor implementation:** Once a policy has been passed, it requires continued engagement and monitoring to ensure it is being implemented. Support for implementation requires the development and adoption of strong regulations. Regulations shift the focus from policymaking to administration. It is also important to ensure that the public is educated about the new policy and able either to take advantage of the services provided (such as the new availability of medicines) or adhere to the restrictions or requirements put in place (no-smoking areas or new speed limits). Effective implementation often requires resources and structures, such as implementation and enforcement plans and monitoring and reporting systems. Budget advocacy plays a key role in ensuring the government is requesting, allocating, spending and reporting on finances to ensure year-by-year allocations and investment in the health programs outlined in the policies. Advocates and communities also often play a role in monitoring gaps in compliance or the reach of services.

11. **Defend policy:** Governments and their priorities may change over time, which can be reflected not only in the evolution of policies but in decisions to change or repeal them. Opposition groups may also challenge policies and regulations to weaken them or remove them on legal grounds. To ensure policies are maintained, expanded and invested in, advocates need to be prepared to defend and enforce them. Civil society has a role to play in providing support to government to defend hard-won policies, advocate for the government to address any policy or implementation gaps and document and share the positive impact of implementation. A policy is also better placed to be sustained if it can expand or evolve to meet the changing needs of the community.

12. **Refine campaign:** At each step in the advocacy campaign, advocates should refine their advocacy objectives, strategies and plans to ensure they are responding to the current environment and leveraging political windows of opportunity. This includes reflecting on what has happened in the past, pulling out the best practices and lessons learned and sharing them with new and old partners and continuing to recruit new collaborators to expand coalitions and train new generations of advocates. It also includes celebrating successes to keep the advocacy community invigorated. While this step is listed last, it can lead to a renewal of the cycle of analyzing, collaborating and advocating.
Strengthening Implementation

Facilitating the adoption of a policy is not the last, nor even necessarily the most difficult, part of the advocacy process. In order to achieve its intended public health impact, a policy must be implemented. Typically, implementation requires the development and adoption of regulations, many of which can require their own advocacy campaigns to adopt. These regulations outline the processes and resources necessary to enact and enforce the policy.

As described by the World Health Organization in the context of cancer control, “A good advocacy plan will be able to respond to newly identified needs for political support and awareness-raising in the community, for instance, for reactivating the development of a comprehensive cancer control plan that has been put on hold; for implementing and scaling up priority interventions; or for influencing improvement strategies that include reorganizing or mobilizing additional resources for a specific component of the cancer control programme.”

Both civil society and governments have a role to play in moving from implementation to compliance of a law. Activities can include:

Civil Society:
- Advocate for ongoing funding, implementation, enforcement and compliance
- Expose and counter opposition from health-harming industries or other vested interests
- Promote results and impact to key stakeholders
- Sustain public engagement
- Initiate or participate in litigation to protect or expand the law
- Serve as ongoing watchdogs to identify gaps in delivery and/or funding
- Help defend laws against legal challenges by opponents when necessary and helpful

Government:
- Maintain consistent, effective enforcement
- Ensure sufficient government funding
- Measure and promote results and impact to sustain government commitment
- Establish administrative and oversight offices and protocols
- Monitor and evaluate policy and programs
“In its efforts to derail or weaken strong tobacco control policies, tobacco industry interference takes many forms. These include maneuvering to hijack the political and legislative process; exaggerating the economic importance of the industry; manipulating public opinion to gain the appearance of respectability; fabricating support through front groups; discrediting proven science; and intimidating governments with litigation or the threat of litigation.”

– World Health Organization

Some barriers to implementation may be technical or bureaucratic rather than political. In addition to calling on governments to deliver on their commitments, advocates can also identify bottlenecks or areas requiring additional information-sharing or technical assistance, some of which can be supplied by civil society itself. Relevant questions include:

- Are the government bodies responsible for implementation or enforcement aware of their roles?
- Do these bodies possess adequate resources and training to ensure implementation or compliance?
- Who is providing training to bodies responsible for implementation or enforcement?
- Does the government possess adequate documentation and reporting mechanisms to monitor progress and allow for course correction?
- Are these issues being addressed sufficiently in the policy development process?

In India, for example, the Ayushman Bharat (universal health care) initiative called for the creation of Health and Wellness Centers (HWCs) to provide comprehensive primary healthcare, including free essential drugs and diagnostic services, close to people’s homes. The COVID pandemic threatened those plans. GHAI worked with India’s Postgraduate Institute of Medical Education and Research to support the Punjab state government to plan and implement the expansion of HWCs, including through strategies for training human resources and technical and capacity-building support for telemedicine services. HWCs in Punjab went on to train more than 2,600 health workers and provide more than 5.2 million consultations with patients from January 2020 through June 2021.5
Monitoring Success and Measuring Impact

Advocacy campaigns aimed at creating or strengthening public health policy can require sustained effort over several years. As such, it’s crucial to implement a system of regular assessment to ensure the campaign is on track and to adjust course as necessary. To measure advocacy effectively, it’s important to set clear objectives, identify relevant metrics and use a variety of tools and methods to gather and analyze data. Just as importantly, this capacity should be built into campaigns from the beginning, by identifying the people, partners, roles and processes by which information will be captured and shared, as well as the resources that will be required – such as reporting tools and education on those tools, time and trust.

Ongoing advocacy campaign evaluation serves multiple purposes:

- **Identifying strengths and weaknesses:** Regular assessments reveal which aspects of the campaign are working effectively and which areas require improvement. For example, these assessments could involve analyzing the impact of communication strategies, the ability to reach key decision-makers, the effectiveness of collaborations with stakeholders or the efficiency of resource allocation.

- **Adapting to changing circumstances:** Political and social environments are dynamic, and what works at one stage of a campaign may not be effective later. Regular evaluation helps campaigns stay adaptable, enabling them to adjust tactics in response to new challenges or opportunities.

- **Measuring effectiveness:** One of the primary goals of campaign evaluations is to gauge the campaign’s effectiveness in achieving its objectives. This involves looking at both direct outcomes, such as changes in policy, and indirect outcomes, like shifts in public opinion or increased awareness of an issue.

- **Prioritizing next steps:** By understanding which aspects of the campaign are most effective, advocates can make informed decisions about where to focus their efforts next. This helps in efficient resource allocation and strategic planning for future phases of the campaign.

- **Understanding long-term impact on public health:** Ultimately, the success of a policy advocacy campaign is measured by its impact on public health. This often requires relying on external sources such as academic research and government statistics. When available, impact data provides critical information for continued implementation, resourcing and strengthening of the policy.
Learning for the future: The lessons learned in an advocacy campaign can be applied to future efforts. For example, in Mexico, where there are more than 16,000 road traffic deaths each year, advocacy by the Coalición Movilidad Segura (the “Safe Mobility Coalition”) led to the adoption of a constitutional amendment in 2020 establishing a right to mobility and road safety, with lessons learned that help the coalition achieve the passage of the General Law on Mobility and Road Safety in 2022.\(^6\)

Because of the number of factors, stakeholders and the amount of time that can be associated with policy change, attributing success to particular actors or even to specific elements of a campaign can be difficult.\(^7\) The landscape analysis and decision-making pathway created at the beginning of the campaign can help advocates to understand those factors, their relationships and their relative influence more clearly. Success is also easier to measure when objectives are SMART and clear. For GHAI, success is measured both in policies passed, changed and funded and in the strengthened capacity of civil society partners to sustain advocacy and build a movement that can ensure implementation for impact. Interim successes, such as getting bills introduced or through committees, should also be noted, evaluated as building blocks for next steps and celebrated.

Academic researchers, in particular, can play an invaluable role in evaluating impact – whether that is of Chile’s food labeling and advertising law, which is associated with reductions in overall calories, sugar and sodium purchased\(^8\) or the Bloomberg Philanthropies Initiative for Global Road Safety, which yielded an estimated 97,148 lives saved between 2007 and 2018, 75 percent of which were the result of legislative changes.\(^9\)

Conclusion

This white paper has drawn on best practices and lessons learned from advocacy campaigns conducted in more than 60 countries by the Global Health Advocacy Incubator and our partners, as well as a broad range of other public health and advocacy experts from around the world. These examples illustrate the multifaceted role of advocacy in public health policy change and demonstrate how it can enable population-wide improvements in health outcomes. In addition to influencing the enactment and implementation of policies, advocacy plays a role in shaping societal norms, mobilizing the public and ensuring that the voices of underrepresented populations are heard.
References


