The Missing Link:
The role of advocacy in achieving equitable, sustainable and effective health outcomes
Acknowledgements

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Global Health Advocacy Incubator
Changing Policies to Save Lives

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

In public health, few tools yield as much population-level impact as policy change. In addition to its direct impact on behavior, policy shapes the environments that influence people’s health, defines public health systems and sets and directs a country’s health priorities and programs. Those policies are the result of ongoing interactions between stakeholders—including government and elected officials, the private sector, academia and civil society. Advocacy by these groups can help countries commit to, plan, fund, implement and learn from public health successes.

The role of policy change in public health

Policies play a central role in public health. Policy can mean different things in different countries, but for the purposes of this discussion, it refers to all government-issued laws, regulations and compulsory standards, as well as public sector budget authorizations and allocations.

As discussed in Public Health Reports, “Some of the nation’s greatest public health successes would not have been possible without policy change.” This is because policies describe and define a country’s public health system, providing both direction and accountability within governments. Policies also shape the environments in which people live and which impact their individual and collective health and wellbeing. These environments include the social determinants of health — “the conditions in the environments where people are born, live, learn, work, play, worship, and age that affect a wide range of health, functioning, and quality-of-life outcomes and risks” — as well as commercial determinants of health — “the private sector activities that affect people’s health, directly or indirectly, positively or negatively.”

Policies include decisions about government funding. Budgets both reflect and enable the achievement of a country’s political priorities. Health budget advocacy is important for countries of all income levels, by promoting funding that is predictable, reliable and sustainable. For example, to prevent and prepare for future pandemic outbreaks, countries require “resilient domestic finances,” which are also necessary for coordinating and implementing international instruments and funding. The 2001 Abuja Declaration by heads of state of African Union countries famously set a target of allocating 15 percent of their annual budgets to the health sector while simultaneously calling on donor countries to fulfill their international Development Assistant commitments—a goal which neither group has met. Between 2000 and 2019, external aid covered roughly 30 percent of low-income countries’ health budgets, with the remainder coming from domestic budgets and out of pocket spending (44 percent), highlighting the need for domestic financing.
The benefits of policy change

Changing policies and budgets is one of the most effective ways to impact public health because policy change has a population-wide impact, is cost-effective and can shape social norms.

1. **Population-wide impact**: One of the most significant advantages of policy change is its potential to impact the health of an entire population of people. Unlike individual behavior change interventions, which may only reach a limited number of people, public policies have the ability to generate population-level change in health outcomes. For example, in the United States, where laws were passed in almost every state requiring the use of seat belts, seat belts saved nearly 330,000 lives between 1960 and 2012 — more than all other vehicle safety features combined. 8

2. **Cost-effective**: By leveraging legislative and regulatory mechanisms, advocates can enact systemic changes that yield significant returns on investment over time9 — by reducing death, illness and injuries and the health system burdens and related productivity losses, across an entire population. 10 Policy change efforts are often less costly than delivering individually focused health interventions and, in some cases (such as excise taxes on unhealthy products), actually produces important new revenue. For example, the World Health Organization (WHO) has identified policies such as tobacco control laws, trans fat bans and sugar taxes11 as “best buys” for countries seeking to cost-effectively reduce their burdens of non-communicable diseases (NCDs).

3. **Norm-shaping**: Beyond its direct impacts on shifting incentives and people’s choices, policy change also plays a vital role in shaping broader social norms and cultural attitudes toward products and practices. 12 By codifying values and principles into law, policymakers have the ability to influence public perceptions and behaviors, driving long-term and often lasting shifts in societal norms. 13 For example, as local governments across the United States adopted smoke-free laws to protect people from secondhand smoke, those laws also encouraged smokers to quit and created a social environment in which smoking was no longer seen as a “normal” or socially acceptable behavior. Those laws, along with other policies that de-normalized tobacco use, have played a critical role in the dramatic decline in smoking (68% since 196514, when the first major tobacco control law was passed15) in the United States.

An additional benefit of policies is that they can codify, scale up and/or sustain successful innovations and pilot programs. For example, after a maternal and reproductive health program in the Tanzania’s Kigoma region had saved more than 1,000 mothers’ lives and improved delivery conditions for 70,000 babies, civil society advocates campaigned for the program to be sustained after international funding ended. This led to a signed transition document with the government that committed to an increased number of skilled health professionals for Kigoma, the retention of health workers trained under the program and annual budget planning for health facilities.16
The role of advocacy

Advocacy is any set of strategic, focused actions to influence decision-makers, either directly or through media and other stakeholders, in order to achieve policy outcomes. Any interested party can advocate for policy change. As noted in the International Journal of Epidemiology, “Every branch of public health can point to the critical role of advocacy in translating research into policy, practice and sea changes in supportive public opinion.”

When policies are initiated, monitored, changed, ended or funded, it’s almost always because some interested party sees a benefit to doing so. The role of public health advocates is to make sure that the public’s interest is represented and especially that the people affected most by a policy’s outcomes have a role in the process.

In order for change to be made at any stage, there must be sufficient political will to do so. This political will must be strong enough to surmount the many challenges and opponents that can prevent policy passage even when the policy is backed by strong evidence. Challenges to policy development and adoption can include (but are not confined to) conflicting priorities, opposition from parties with competing interests, a lack of awareness or information, insufficient resources or simple inertia.

Political will has been defined as “(1) A sufficient set of decision-makers (2) with a common understanding of a particular problem on the formal agenda (3) are committed to supporting (4) a commonly perceived, potentially effective policy solution.” Effective advocates, therefore, will identify the decision-makers responsible for delivering the policy solutions they seek and the best ways to reach them, with the right messages and messengers, at the right time. Political will also requires a common understanding of an issue, which depends on an informed public and can be shaped by media and public awareness campaigns, grassroots and “grass tops” organizing and other such efforts.

By changing policies, advocates help to transform systems and incentives — and ultimately change norms and behavior. To reach that point, in most cases they must first mobilize fellow advocates and allies and educate the broader population about the issue, the solutions and the need for change. The impact of advocacy, in short, can be felt at different levels:

- **Social movement mobilization:** Sustainable movements of champions and civil society advocates drive demand, build political will and ensure policy changes are implemented and defended.
- **Policy change:** Population-level policy changes that improve health and save lives are adopted, funded and implemented.
- **System and environment transformation:** Health systems and the environments that impact health are strengthened to minimize risk factors for death, injury and disease and enhance equity, effectiveness and sustainability.
- **Social norms change:** Policies are socialized and reinforced through modeled behavior change and increased public awareness and acceptance of health promoting behaviors.
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.”

The role of advocates

Policies are the result of ongoing interactions between stakeholders—including government and elected officials, the private sector, academia and civil society. All play important roles. One of the strengths of civil society advocacy is that it can bring the voices of people who will be most affected by policies directly to decision-makers.

Civil society is defined by GHAI as the voluntary participation of citizens in the civic and social bodies that are distinct from state and commercial institutions and form the basis of a functioning society. As described by the World Economic Forum, “Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), labour leaders, faith-based organizations, religious leaders and other civil society representatives play a critical and diverse set of roles in societal development.... Recently, a renewed focus on the essential contribution of civil society to a resilient global system alongside government and business has emerged.”

The literature lists many roles for civil society relevant to advocacy, including helping governments to:

- “make...policy and legal changes to institutionalize domestic watchdog institutions...”
- “adopt specific policies...”
- “enact and rescind legislation...”
- “amend long-standing constitutional provisions.”

Advocates can contribute to sustainability by building a constituency that will keep a spotlight on their issue and hold decision-makers accountable for implementing the policies they’ve adopted. One example of advocacy that drove change over decades began in 1988, when a civil society group called the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) was established in South Africa to advocate for improved...
HIV/AIDS health service delivery. Their sustained advocacy, including ongoing monitoring of government policies of their impact, helped lead to the Operational Plan for Comprehensive HIV/AIDS Care and Management and Treatment for South Africa in 2003 and eventually to an antiretroviral therapy program that helped avert an estimated 780,000 deaths between 2004 and 2012.22

Conclusion

The conditions that affect population-level health are neither accidental nor inevitable. They are the result of choices: decisions made every day by leaders about what to prioritize, what to champion, what to fund and what to ignore. Decision-makers evaluate these choices based on the information available to them, their own preferences and incentives and the people, organizations and coalitions who are able to hold their attention. Effective public health advocacy increases the likelihood that decision-makers will adopt and defend policies that reduce disease and injury, improve health and save lives.
References


