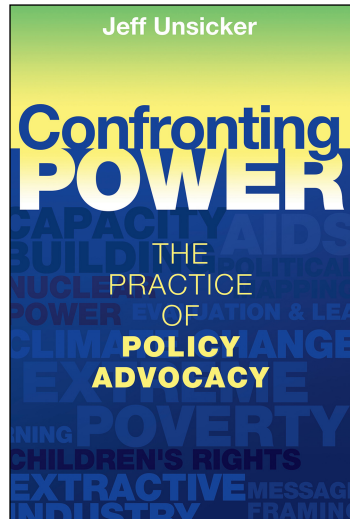


EXCERPTED FROM

Confronting Power:
The Practice of Policy Advocacy

Jeff Unsicker



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ISBNs: 978-1-56549-533-3 hc

978-1-56549-534-0 pb

 Kumarian Press

A Division of Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc. • Boulder & London

1800 30th Street, Suite 314

Boulder, CO 80301 USA

telephone 303.444.6684

fax 303.444.0824

This excerpt was downloaded from the
Lynne Rienner Publishers website
www.rienner.com

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
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PART ONE

1	Introduction	3
2	Conceptual Maps	11
	CASE A: A Small Town in Peru Battles a Multinational Mining Corporation <i>Rosa Maria Olortegui</i> , coauthor	25
3	Advocacy Circles: Basic Elements	30
	CASE B: Vermonters Advocate to Close a Nuclear Power Reactor	51
4	Advocacy Circles: Intersections	58

PART TWO

	CASE C: BRAC Advocacy Unit, Bangladesh: What Next? <i>Sheepa Hafiza</i> , coauthor	69
5	Advocates: Building Capacity	81
	CASE C: Conclusion	87
	CASE D: Research and Advocacy for a Ghana AIDS Commission <i>Nikoi Kote-Nikoi</i> , coauthor	92
6	Policy: Problems, Causes, and Solutions	96
	CASE D: Conclusion	111

	CASE E: Oxfam America Climate Change Campaign	
	Political Mapping <i>Gabrielle Watson</i> , coauthor	119
7	Politics: Formal and Nonformal Power	127
	CASE E: Conclusion	142
	CASE F: Safe Power Vermont Coalition	
	Phase Two of Advocacy to Close the Nuclear Reactor	147
8	Strategy: People Power and Other Methods	150
	CASE F: Conclusion	166
	CASE G: Kids Are Priority One Coalition	
	Framing the Message <i>Kim Friedman</i> , coauthor	178
9	Advocacy Communications: (Re)framing and Storytelling	191
	CASE G: Conclusion	212
	CASE H: Oxfam America Climate Change Campaign	
	Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning	217
	<i>Gabrielle Watson</i> , coauthor	
10	Advocacy Evaluation and Learning	225
	CASE H: Conclusion	246
	<i>About the Author and Coauthors</i>	255
	<i>Index</i>	259

1

Introduction

IN PERU, THE CITIZENS OF TAMBOGRADE FORM A “DEFENSE FRONT” TO BLOCK A multinational corporation from digging an open pit mine in the middle of their town.

In Bangladesh, one of the world’s largest development nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) builds capacity to influence policy makers and government officials regarding the needs and rights of the rural poor, migrant workers, and other vulnerable groups.

In Ghana, a policy think tank researches the impact of HIV/AIDS on the country’s economy, and working with allies within NGOs and civil society, the media, various international donors, and government agencies persuades policy makers to create a national commission to combat the spread of the disease.

In the United States, citizen associations, public interest groups, and environmental organizations in Vermont organize to replace a forty-year-old nuclear power plant with safe and green alternatives, while other Vermont organizations convince the state legislature to increase funding for early childhood education.

The US affiliate of a global NGO helps convince members of the US House of Representatives to expand funding for poor countries that are most affected by rising sea levels, droughts, floods, and other consequences of climate change.

These citizens, associations, organizations, networks, and coalitions are practicing policy advocacy, one method for social change committed to the needs and rights of people and the planet. It focuses on different problems and issues in different parts of the world, applied at multiple levels from local to global.

I have been involved in policy advocacy campaigns and initiatives for nearly four decades (including the campaign to replace Vermont's nuclear power reactor [see Case B in chapter 3, pages 51–57]). During many of those years I have also been involved in the systematization and sharing of knowledge about policy advocacy. My first experience was from 1974 to 1980 as the primary facilitator for sessions on policy advocacy during a year-long leadership education program for staff of community-based human service and social action organizations in San Diego, California. Most recently, as a professor of sustainable development at the SIT Graduate Institute in Vermont, I have regularly taught a course on policy advocacy for experienced and aspiring social justice professionals from the United States and around the world.

This book is an effort to share what I have been learning with a broader audience. It provides resources—general concepts and specific case examples—which are useful for two targeted audiences:

- advocates who are engaged in planning, conducting, evaluating, and learning from their own campaigns and initiatives; and
- students who wish to understand and become (more) deeply involved in policy advocacy work.

Defining Policy Advocacy

While there are many appropriate definitions, I use the following definition:

Policy advocacy is the process by which people, NGOs, other civil society organizations, networks, and coalitions seek to enhance social and economic justice, environmental sustainability, and peace by influencing policies, policy implementation, and policy-making processes of governments, corporations, and other powerful institutions.

This is a value-laden and somewhat dense definition. In this chapter I briefly discuss the definition's components as an initial introduction to policy advocacy.

But first it is helpful to point out that other terms are often used for *policy advocacy*. For example, many Europeans refer to it as “campaigning” or “policy influencing,” and the term *public interest lobbying* is used

by many in the United States for what I am calling policy advocacy. No term is more correct than another. Effective advocates need to be able to differentiate an activity from the words used to describe it, as well as to clarify the language they are using. To that end, in this book, *campaign* is used in a more limited sense to describe a focused advocacy initiative rather than the entire field of practice. *Lobbying* is used to describe only the element of an advocacy initiative that involves direct communication with policy makers. Moreover, while *advocacy* is very often used to describe actions that are outside my definition, in this book it is simply used as a shortened version of *policy advocacy*.¹

With that understanding, we return to the definition and the meaning of its terminology. The following highlights one element of the definition: the advocates.

*Policy advocacy is the process by which **people, NGOs, other civil society organizations, networks, and coalitions** seek to attain political, economic, cultural, and environmental rights by influencing policies, policy implementation, and policy-making processes of governments, corporations, and other powerful institutions.*

Who the advocates are will vary depending on who is affected by a policy, if and how those people are organized, and if yet others are committed to working with or for them. In some situations, where advocacy focuses on the policies of institutions that are relatively small and accessible (for example, a local government body), one individual or a small loosely organized group can successfully influence policy. However, in most situations, successful advocacy requires one or more formal organizations, often working together through networks and coalitions.

There is great variety in the types of organizations involved in advocacy, ranging from those formed and controlled by people affected by a policy to outside organizations with useful technical knowledge and skills. Some of those organizations are solely committed to policy advocacy; others also provide services or carry out other functions. Indeed, many problems can only be solved through a combination of policy advocacy and other activities, such as health services or consumer education.

Some organizations have many staff dedicated to this work, often with specializations in different aspects of advocacy (research, organizing, media, lobbying, etc.). Other organizations have no designated staff for advocacy and rely totally on board members, executives, program

managers, and professional staff to do advocacy alongside their other duties. Still other organizations have no staff and rely completely on citizen volunteers.

The following highlights the *purpose* of policy advocacy.

*Policy advocacy is the process by which individuals, NGOs, other civil society organizations, networks, and coalitions seek to build **social and economic justice, environmental sustainability, and peace** by influencing policies, policy implementation, and policy-making processes of governments, corporations, and other powerful institutions.*

The purpose is what advocates seek to build, protect, and expand. One could choose other terms to describe that purpose, for example, “political, economic, cultural, and environmental rights.” But whatever words are chosen, it is important to recognize that advocacy begins with the advocates’ vision of a better world. Efforts to realize that vision can focus on one or a combination of many different issues, such as halting construction of an open pit mine in the middle of a small town or passing legislation that will provide aid to regions most affected by global warming. What they have in common is a commitment to challenge the power of self-interested elites in order to protect and enhance the interests of the general public—especially those parts of the public that have been socially, politically, and economically marginalized—and of nature.²

The following highlights what are often referred to as the targets of policy advocacy—the *powerful institutions* that advocates must influence to achieve their purpose.

*Policy advocacy is the process by which individuals, NGOs, other civil society organizations, networks, and coalitions seek to attain **political, economic, cultural, and environmental rights** by influencing policies, policy implementation, and policy-making processes of **governments, corporations, and other powerful institutions**.*

Frequently, decisions and actions by those institutions work against the public good. Yet the institutions also have the power to enable progress.

Advocacy often focuses on governments, including multigovernmental organizations such as the World Bank and corporations, since they are typically the world’s most powerful institutions. However, many other institutions can be the focus of advocacy. For example, a college or university

has significant power over the lives of its students and often influences the community where it is located. Even the executive board of a progressive citizens' association or trade union might become the focus of advocacy if it were to misuse its power and become unresponsive to its membership.

The following highlights what advocates seek to influence.

*Policy advocacy is the process by which individuals, NGOs, other civil society organizations, networks, and coalitions seek to attain political, economic, cultural, and environmental rights by influencing **policies, policy implementation, and policy-making processes** of governments, corporations, and other powerful institutions.*

A policy, for our purposes, is any decision that guides the behavior of an institution of power.³ Advocacy influences those institutions by influencing the *policies* those institutions enact. It also does so by influencing *policy implementation*, since too often policies are enacted that guarantee rights or are in the interest of the public and marginalized groups but then are not enforced or ever put into practice—at least not fully and effectively.

Moreover, advocacy efforts can sometimes influence powerful institutions through influencing their policies on *policy making*, that is, the decisions about what structures, systems, rules, and practices will guide the process by which institutions enact and implement policies. Policy advocates seek to ensure that those affected by an institution's policies may have a meaningful role in the policy-making process. This type of advocacy often focuses on policies related to public access to information, transparency, and active participation.

Since policies guide the behavior of various types of powerful institutions, they take many forms, which include constitutions, government laws and proclamations, and corporate guidelines. Budgets of governments (from national to local) and other powerful institutions are among the most powerful policies; they establish how and from whom resources will be secured, as well as how and in whose interests the funds will be spent. The judicial branch of government may make policies through precedent-setting decisions in court cases. Corporations make many policy decisions that have an impact on the public—what to sell, where to invest, whether and how to intervene in elections and policy making, and so forth. Financial aid eligibility requirements of colleges or universities

are policies that strongly affect students and the institution. So too are the membership admission criteria for a citizens' association or trade union. What all these policies have in common is that they are decisions made by institutions that have a significant impact on the lives of others or on the environment.

The following highlights the fact that advocacy is a process of influencing policies.

*Policy advocacy is the **process** by which individuals, NGOs, other civil society organizations, networks, and coalitions seek to attain political, economic, cultural, and environmental rights by **influencing** policies, policy implementation, and policy-making processes of governments, corporations, and other powerful institutions.*

As such, it can take many forms. While often associated with confrontation—for example, grassroots mobilization, boycotts, and street protests—in many situations advocacy involves more collaborative methods, such as educating political officials and forming partnerships with public institutions. Frequently, advocacy strategies employ a combination of confrontation and collaboration, either by design or because different advocacy groups choose to pursue different approaches, possibly at the risk of tensions among them. Whenever possible, the advocacy process should involve methods for raising political consciousness among the public or marginalized groups and building their capacity to be engaged in advocacy strategies. However, in every case, the process must include specific methods for *influencing* the person, people, or structures that will make a policy decision. The influence may be direct (for example, lobbying, letters, and petitions) or indirect (for example, media coverage and public opinion polls). The choices advocates make depend on multiple factors, including the historical moment, the distribution of power in society, the policy-making institutions, the specific policy issues, and the current political space for participation in policy making.

Chapters and Cases

Having offered a definition of *policy advocacy*, we now move to chapter 2, which focuses on conceptual maps and introduces four different ways to understand various elements of an advocacy campaign or initiative.

The fourth map, Advocacy Circles, is one that I developed through my teaching. It is discussed more thoroughly in chapter 3 and chapter 4. Preceding each of those chapters is a case study that grounds the conceptual framework in relation to the practice or experience of a specific advocacy campaign or initiative.

The next chapters, which constitute Part Two, go into more depth regarding aspects of policy advocacy that correspond to four circles in my conceptual map (advocates, policy, politics, and strategy) and to two related topics (advocacy communications and advocacy evaluation and learning). Each of those chapters has a corresponding case study. Each case is introduced prior to its chapter and poses a learning exercise. The remainder of the case follows the chapter and offers an opportunity to compare the reader's notes with what actually occurred.

The chapters are neither academic reviews of the relevant literature nor are they how-to guides; there are already many good resources of each. Rather, the topic of each chapter is covered by relying on one or a small number of readings I use in my courses. A number of those readings are chapters from two very useful books that I have used as course texts for the past five years: *The Democracy Owner's Manual* by Jim Shultz and *A New Weave of Power, People and Politics* by Lisa VeneKlasen with Valerie Miller.⁴

I also draw heavily on another very useful resource: *Advocacy for Social Justice* by David Cohen, Rosa de la Vega, and Gabrielle Watson.⁵ I have known David Cohen for many years and had the privilege of working closely with him for five years on a series of leadership for social justice institutes. They were cosponsored by SIT and the Advocacy Institute in Washington, DC, which David Cohen cofounded as a way to share what he had learned through his work as a national leader in public interest advocacy. His experience and wisdom are why many of us consider him the "dean of advocacy." Thus it is fitting to close this introduction with some of his advice:

There is value in getting started. Nothing teaches more than experience, whether it is new skills being learned or confidence built to overcome the risks inherent in social change. When getting started, people must avoid getting paralyzed by the need for comprehensive, systemic change. One rarely goes from "what is" to "what should be" in a single leap. . . . Rather they are realized through a long-term incremental process that keeps sight of a larger vision. Small changes and ongoing activities are vital.⁶

Notes

1. *Advocacy* is used to describe a wide range of efforts to promote a position or cause, which may or may not include promoting change in policy. For example, *advocacy* is commonly used to describe the arguments made by an individual in the context of a discussion or debate that has nothing to do with policy change. Thus, *policy advocacy* as used here is only one type of advocacy. On the other hand, advocacy is closely associated with professionals who advocate on someone else's behalf. Lawyers, who are advocates in many countries, represent clients in matters of law, including in courtrooms, where they are incapable of representing themselves. In the social welfare professions in the United States and other countries, advocates (or *client* advocates) represent individuals who do not know how to access services they are entitled to under existing policies and programs.

2. The focus on *rights* is one way that policy advocacy, as defined in this book, excludes efforts by the elite or their representatives to influence public policy. The elite do use many of the same advocacy methods (media, lobbying, etc). But, to support those methods, the elite almost always have far greater access to financial and other resources than do advocates, especially those advocates who are from or working for the poor and marginalized groups in society. However, the primary difference is regarding goals: this book focuses on advocacy for the public interest, on efforts to gain and protect political, economic, sociocultural, and environmental rights; it does not include efforts by the elite to protect or expand their own self-interests.

3. Less formal organizations and even individuals can formulate policies defined this broadly (for example, "It is my policy to get up by 6:30 a.m. every morning."), but advocacy is focused on those institutions that have an impact on a significant number of others.

4. Jim Shultz, *The Democracy Owner's Manual: A Practical Guide to Changing the World* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002); Lisa Veneklasen with Valerie Miller, *A New Weave of Power, People and Politics: The Action Guide for Advocacy and Citizen Participation* (Warwickshire, UK: Practical Action Publishers, 2007).

5. David Cohen, Rosa de la Vega, and Gabrielle Watson, *Advocacy for Social Justice: A Global Action and Reflection Guide* (Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press, 2001).

6. David Cohen, *Advocacy for Social Justice*, 4.