

ADVOCACY

Influencing policy development can be challenging, as policy rarely follows a linear process. Instead, policy development is a subjective process, and success is largely based on political will for the implementation of a policy. Top down support from senior leaders in government can help ensure the implementation of policies and legislation that will ensure progress towards goals. However, support from a range of actors is likely needed, as political will can be shaped by the views and strategies of a range of actors, including the public, academics, interest groups, NGOs, other politicians, constituents and a range of other actors [1].

Those with an interest in a policy can use a range of strategies to influence policy development. The process of undertaking active interventions with the explicit goal of influencing government policy is known as advocacy[2]. Advocacy differs from lobbying, in that lobbying describes the act of influencing a specific law, policy or guideline. Globally, governments tend to have restrictions on lobbying, particularly the amount allowed to be spent on lobbying, but advocacy largely is not subject to such restrictions.

However, individual institutions may have internal policies and guidelines that relate to the nature of advocacy and the language allowed. If using mass media releases as an advocacy strategy, for example, then there may be extensive sign-off processes to align language with these internal policies and guidelines. Before engaging in advocacy, it is important to check both national and institutional policies to ensure you are aware of any potential restrictions that will need to be factored in to your planning process.

Aim of Advocacy

In order to plan effective advocacy strategies, it is important to understand what you aim to achieve, the opportunities for change, and how you will know when you've made progress. Developing a theory of change collectively with your team can help define these parameters, build a common understanding, identify how to achieve progress and help measure your effectiveness.



DEVELOPING A THEORY OF CHANGE

Bond gives useful practical guidance to develop a theory of change^[3]; in summary:

- Define the overall change you are working towards. This should be a long term goal, at least three years in the future. Think about what newspaper headlines would look like on the day that goal is reached.
- Identify the critical success factors that need to happen before the overall change can be achieved. Map the factors that support change and the barriers to change, and identify the 3-5 most significant areas where change is needed to achieve the overall goal.
- Clarify your organisation's specific contributions, and the contributions of other organisations working towards the same change you are, to identify where your organisation can add value.
- Identify how you will measure progress in the short, medium and long term. Progress should be realistic and measurable, and small changes (e.g. getting a meeting with a member of parliament who had previously refused to meet with your organisation) matter as much as larger victories (e.g. the introduction of a law).
- Map your activities to progress. If you are already engaging in advocacy activities, identify how each activity will lead to change. If you don't already have activities planned, identify activities that could lead to change.
- Test your theory of change. Invite experts and partners to review the theory of change, ensure it makes sense and provide comments for improvement.

Stakeholders

Given that policy is a collaborative process influenced by various actors, it is important to identify all actors involved and how they can be influenced.

Decision Makers

Identify who is involved in the development of the policy within government e.g.:

- Is the policy overseen by the Ministry of Health? If so, who within the Ministry is responsible for the policy?
- Are other government departments involved in the governance of the policy?
- Have government commissioned an external organisation to provide research, data or insight that will shape the policy?

Map out all decision makers and identify if your organisation or partners have existing links with these teams.

Allies

Next identify who can support you in your call. Your allies are crucial as the government is unlikely to listen or make decisions as a result of one individual or one organisation's advocacy efforts. However, if a group of individuals and organisations call for action, they are more likely to take notice: multiple voice are harder to ignore.

Map out all organisations and individuals who have similar aims and strategic goals to yours. You will do this as part of the theory of change exercise i.e. consider how their work differs or is similar to your own, and therefore how you can add value and complement their work. Invest in these relationships with regular meetings, workshops, sharing information and establishing working groups. These allies can support you even if your call for action is outside their strategic priorities.

Policy theory tells us that policy entrepreneurs – those with knowledge and power to influence the policy process and implement solutions – are a key actor in the policy process. Policy entrepreneurs may be politicians, leaders of interest groups, high profile people with knowledge of the policy and issues the policy is aiming to address, notable academics, key NGOs, or any other unofficial spokesperson for the policy.

Who are the policy entrepreneurs in relation to your policy goals and how might you capitalise on their influence?

Opponents

There will be opponents to most policies and it is important to understand their arguments against the change you want to see. This will allow you to strengthen your activities and identify how to counteract their strategies.

You can counter their arguments by analysing the basis of their views, and relying on the evidence that informs your goals. Avoid the 'familiarity backfire effect', where in the process of countering a myth, you mention the myth and thereby make people more familiar with it and reinforce it in people's minds[1]. Instead, share your research and reports in engaging ways to highlight your facts, and ensure you engage with a wide range of stakeholders so that a range of people are hearing your side of the story, not just your opponent's.

Advocacy Strategies

The NCD Alliance outline eight stages of advocacy planning [5].

Situation Analysis

The basis of any advocacy strategy should be evidence. Conduct a desk review of all relevant research and reports, media coverage and any relevant legal or policy documents. Where there is a lack of evidence, commission research to unveil key evidence.

Assess the policy environment – are there policies with a link to salt reduction already in place? Are those policies in line with international guidelines? Are there any incoming changes, such as an election or cabinet changes, on the horizon?

Select Priority Issues, Goals, Objectives

From the evidence, identify the key facts you want to convey. What change do you want to see happen, and what is the solution to achieve that change?

Consider criteria such as the scope of the issue; the strength of the evidence and the feasibility of the solution; how to communicate the issue and solution - what story will you tell to journalists, to government, to the public?; and the likelihood of support for the solution and who you need to engage to build support.

Political Mapping

Identify your policy audience, including the government departments, decision makers, and policy entrepreneurs with the power and influence to implement change. Investigate their views and opinions, positions, areas of work and power dynamics. Where necessary, conduct interviews or focus groups to uncover additional evidence or information.

Classify the policy audience into champions, allies and opponents and produce advocacy tactics tailored to each group.

Advocacy Tactics and Messages

Various tactics can be used, including meetings, consultation responses, conferences, social media, press conferences, and letters.

- Is your audience local to your organisation? If so, physical resources such as leaflets, posters, and billboards would be most effective at conveying your messages.
- Social marketing[6] (i.e. using marketing principles and practices to influence health-related behaviours) can help reach a wide range of people, and help engage local communities with salt reduction messages.

- If your audience is national or international, social media channels, website content and newsletters may be more appropriate. Consider how to make your content as clear and engaging as possible, and how you can target key decision makers with social media content.
- Mass media will be a resource for all audiences - do you have existing relationships with local or national journalists or are you aware of key health journalists who would be willing to write about salt reduction? Prepare simple press releases that summarises your research and reports, with three key messages and a strong call to action.
- Regardless of your audience, a network of supporters can help extend the reach and impact of your messages. Do you have a network of supporters, or some form of patient and public involvement group? Manage the network via email and regular newsletter communications. You may also want to consider engaging a community or public involvement specialist.
- Workshops can help engage stakeholders in your work, helping to disseminate research but also engaging a range of stakeholders in developing solutions, identifying policy asks or developing more impactful advocacy strategies.
- Writing letters and emails to decision makers, summarising key messages and asking for meetings to discuss these further, can also be a key advocacy strategy. Ask partners and supporters to co-sign the letter, and ask supporters to attend meetings to share their perspectives.

Build Support Among Constituencies

Due to the scale of issues associated with excess salt intake, coordinated action by partnerships and alliances is necessary to achieve action. A range of stakeholders should be approached to form an alliance, including medical professionals, public health experts, policymakers, NGOS, global organisations and associated regional offices e.g. World Health Organization, the public and patients, academics, and research institutions.

Create a Workplan and Budget

After developing a theory of change, a workplan can be developed with activities designed to reach your goals, associated timelines and necessary resource and budget. The workplan can help keep you on track.

Roll Out the Advocacy Plan

Use windows of opportunity to launch aspects of the plan, remain responsive to changing external environments and remain flexible to adapting the plan as needed, and monitor feedback and media coverage to identify further windows of opportunity.

Monitor and Evaluate

Track outcomes and achievements via monitoring processes, and identify lessons learned via evaluation.

Examples of outcomes and achievements include the number and type of supportive statements made by policymakers; number of spokespeople trained; number of media hits; increased level of funding in government budget for your issue.

To explore lessons learned, consider:

- Expectations: what did you think would happen?
- Reality: what actually happened?
- Challenges: what didn't work so well?
- Achievements: what did work well?
- Improvements: what could you have done differently?
- Recommendations: what advice would you give to others conducting a similar campaign?

Barriers

Influencing policy is a challenge. Identifying how you will measure progress via your theory of change allows you to celebrate the small wins and keep going. You will face many setbacks, and may have to alter your strategy frequently as you adapt to the political landscape.

Government may not want to intervene on salt reduction initially, as this would mean setting guidelines or restrictions for the food industry which may be the largest industry in your country. However, building broad support for intervention across a range of stakeholders can help pave the way for government intervention.

Your theory of change will also help you identify other avenues for change. In relation to salt reduction, if creating need for targets is a challenge, can you:

- advocate individual companies to take charge?
- focus on the need to engage with voluntary strategies, as increasingly legislation is the key?
- focus on other levers initially, such as mandatory salt labelling on back of pack nutrition information panels, front of pack labels that clearly highlight salt content, or advertising restrictions for unhealthy (including high salt) products?

EXAMPLE: SALT REDUCTION

Where salt content information is available on pack, conducting surveys of products in a particular category and issuing as a press release, can be an impactful way of getting companies to pay attention to salt reduction as they will not want to be called out as underperforming. Even without salt targets in place in a country, salt content could be compared against the WHO's Global Sodium Benchmarks. Key steps include:

- Identify a category of food that is a **key contributor** to salt intake, e.g. sauces, processed meats, or cheeses.
- **Conduct a survey** of these products to identify how salt content varies between different brands.
- **Prepare a report** of the findings, including key calls to action for food companies, the government and individuals.
- **Press release the survey.** Share your results with the key decision makers and allies.
- Following the release of the survey, **approach companies to discuss the results** and to highlight the importance of salt reduction. These meetings can help build relationships with key players and to gather important information about what action the food industry is or isn't taking with regard to salt reduction.

Resources

- **University of Kansas Community Tool Box.** Toolkits <https://ctb.ku.edu/en/advocating-change>
- **Bond.** Theory of change for advocacy and campaigns <https://www.bond.org.uk/resources/theory-of-change-for-advocacy-and-campaigns>
- **GACD.** Stakeholder engagement <https://www.gacd.org/resources/researchers-and-students/stakeholder-engagement>
- **NCD Alliance.** Practical Guide to Strategic Advocacy Planning <https://ncdalliance.org/resources/practical-guide-to-strategic-advocacy-planning>

References

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4. The Conversation, 2015 <https://theconversation.com/busting-myths-a-practical-guide-to-countering-science-denial-42618>
5. NCD Alliance https://ncdalliance.org/sites/default/files/resource_files/ai-practical-guide-to-advocacy_0.pdf
6. Salt reduction in Latin America: a regional social marketing and communication plan <https://idl-bnc-idrc.dspacedirect.org/handle/10625/58944>