

Strategies used by international NGOs to influence public policy

Véronique de Geoffroy and Alain Robyns

Tuesday, 30 March 2010

The limits of purely operational aid have become increasingly apparent. No matter how relevant, an aid programme can not resolve all the problems which have created a crisis and the resulting needs. Most of the time, these problems are political. As a result, many international NGOs have developed strategies to influence public policy. Following the example of other sectors, they dedicate significant resources to lobbying national and international decision-makers (governments and international organisations).

The role of NGOs vis-à-vis public authorities: opposition force or advisers?

Table of contents

The role of NGOs vis-à-vis public authorities: (...)
The critical points of advocacy activities
Diluted and standardised messages – the issue (...)
An advocacy code of practice?
Conclusion

Advocacy can involve a number of activities such as awareness-raising, mobilisation of public opinion, providing expert advice, networking and lobbying. Generally, these are combined and are part of an overall strategy. The chosen strategy depends on three factors: the atmosphere and kind of dialogue which exists between the organisation and the authorities, analysis of the risks involved and the organisation's culture.

Traditionally, international NGOs were more likely to indulge in "external" [1] advocacy, mobilising public opinion and taking part in protest movements. Nowadays, however, a large number of international NGOs opt for "internal" advocacy and target political decision-makers. A study commissioned by CONCORD [2] in 2003 showed that collective external advocacy campaigns by NGOs had only had a relatively limited impact on the decisions and directives of the European Commission. The study concluded that the strategies used to influence civil servants in European institutions, who are less receptive to public opinion campaigns, needed to be revised. It recommended that lobbying should be based on better analysis of the internal decision-making networks within the EU, that positions on different issues should be determined and that NGOs should reach agreement about the messages they wanted to get across via "corridor advocacy" or classical lobbying activities.

On the strength of their field experience, NGOs attempt to influence public policy via active engagement in current debates. In recent years, international NGOs have undoubtedly gained recognition from the institutions that they campaign against. They have already won two major battles: by taking part in international social and political debates, they have convinced a lot of people to return to political action, and they have imposed themselves on the international scene to such an extent that they are now listened to by governments and the most powerful corporations [3].

The development of international NGO networks capable of gathering and organising information, taking positions and monitoring the practical implementation of international decisions and commitments is a form of safeguard during the construction of world governance [4]. At the same time, their ability to influence and modify the rules of globalisation remains much weaker than that of governments and corporations.

The critical points of advocacy activities

All advocacy activities run the risk of creating conflict. External advocacy which puts pressure on political decision-makers can lead to an issue being managed in a hurry and decisions being made which are not very well adapted or which have repercussions for those responsible for the advocacy. Humanitarian NGOs in the field are often confronted with the dilemma of denunciation: should they say nothing so that they can stay or should they talk and run the risk of being thrown out? This dilemma pushes a certain number of actors to choose confidentiality in their advocacy strategy, such as the ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross) which has developed an approach based on confidentiality and where denunciation is the exception. Of course, the ICRC is not in need of notoriety or funding.

Being able to influence decisions through political advocacy can be perceived to be a form of interference or intrusion in the exercise of power. It creates conflict in the decision-making process. International NGOs must therefore establish their legitimacy and credibility, two essential factors which are often challenged. They gain legitimacy from their activities in the field and credibility from their knowledge of issues and their collection and analysis of information. NGOs can pass on information about the situations that they encounter, can take action in the name of the populations that they serve and can establish expertise in the field. Greenpeace and Amnesty International produce annual reports on the basis of surveys and studies carried out using their networks. Governments are often perturbed by this monitoring of their affairs on subjects such as Human Rights and the Environment, but these documents give the NGOs credibility with which they can counter criticisms.

Over and above field knowledge, it has become crucial to have technical expertise. NGOs have therefore established more and more partnerships with the world of research. In order to intervene in the political decision-making process it is not enough to be fighting for a just cause. A convincing argument is also needed, with evidence to support and focus the debate. It needs to be backed up with facts, research, analysis and even scientific evidence to help decision-makers make their decisions. American and European think-tanks, foundations, research centres and universities are sources of "intellectual production" with whom NGOs and lobbying firms collaborate to develop their expertise and feed their advocacy work.

It is impossible for elected politicians to know everything about all the legislation that is produced by national parliaments and European and international institutions. As a result, they turn to experts to help them. As part of their strategy to influence international policy and gain expertise and credibility, NGOs should therefore develop their relations with think tanks.

Diluted and standardised messages – the issue of alliances.

In recent years the number of awareness-raising campaigns has grown, as has the number of organisations involved in advocacy activities. Every association runs their own campaigns, but the multiplication of messages creates the risk that they become diluted and lost in the mass of information and also that the public and intermediaries such as journalists lose interest. It would be impossible for authorities to deal with all the subtle differences which would inevitably appear between uncoordinated advocacy activities. Coordination is therefore necessary between NGOs so that they speak with one voice to public authorities and political decision-makers. It is when organisations create alliances and lead joint campaigns that advocacy is the most effective. Together, the different members of an alliance increase their weight and legitimacy as they represent collective interests which can be more easily assimilated to the common good. They also improve the possibility of success in situations where the majority vote is needed. Three different types of alliance exist:

- *Networks* - groups of individuals and/or organisations who work together and help each other on a very flexible basis to achieve their respective objectives and run joint projects;
- *Coalitions* – circumstantial agreement to defend a shared interest or to oppose a shared adversary;
- *Pressure / Lobby group* – an established group of individuals or organisations with shared strategic and self-serving interests.

But although alliances give organisations' demands more legitimacy, they also involve making compromises in the definition of objectives and means. By creating an alliance, individual organisations become less visible and their demands become more minimal and consensual.

An advocacy code of practice?

As early as 1994, a certain number of humanitarian actors clarified in the *Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief* that, "Respect for the disaster victim as an equal partner in action should never be lost. In our public information we shall portray an objective image of the disaster situation where the capacities and aspirations of disaster victims are highlighted, and not just their vulnerabilities and fears. While we will co-operate with the media in order to enhance public response, we will not allow external or internal demands for publicity to take precedence over the principle of maximising overall relief assistance. We will avoid competing with other disaster response agencies for media coverage in situations where such coverage may be to the detriment of the service provided to the beneficiaries or to the security of our staff or the beneficiaries." The links between information and marketing are an underlying theme in this text and this question continues to be relevant in external advocacy activities today. Advocacy campaigns are a means for NGOs to increase their visibility and raise funds. As such, it is not always easy to distinguish between advocacy and appeals for donations, which are also known as citizen mobilisation campaigns. The use of images for advocacy, visibility or fund-raising is regularly debated amongst NGOs. In awareness- and fund-raising campaigns, there appears to be a move away from very emotive images of people in need to more dignified images.

What is more, if the advocacy activities of international NGOs are to remain consistent with the values that they defend, it is not possible to use every form of pressure - "Political advocacy for social issues must respect certain ethical standards and therefore avoid the fraudulent or illegal techniques and tactics which are used in the commercial and political domains - violence, intimidation, misinformation, blackmail and corruption [5] " .

Conclusion

International NGOs use a variety of different strategies to influence public policy. With the globalisation of aid issues, these have changed significantly in recent decades. Each strategy requires different means and levels of expertise. Communication requires a certain level of technical know-how and needs to be consistent with a precise methodological approach. The arguments put forward need to have solid foundations, as this forms the basis of a campaign's legitimacy and credibility.

The efforts that NGOs have made in this domain have already borne fruit (some of which has been recognised via the awarding of a Nobel Prize) and have given them a new status. However, before investing themselves in advocacy activities, NGOs need to consider a number of critical issues, such as the competition that is created when more and more organisations become involved, the risk of messages becoming diluted, the blurring of lines between marketing and advocacy and the risk of being integrated into the decision-making process and losing independence.

Véronique de Geoffroy, Director of operations, Groupe URD
Alain Robyns, consultant

This article is based on the findings of a [study commissioned by the NGO, Aide et Action](#).

[1] That is to say, by mobilising public opinion to influence policy via a confrontational approach with the objective of getting the attention of governments and forcing them to respond publicly. This type of advocacy is different from internal or technical advocacy which involves trying to convince political decision-makers, through analysis and expert knowledge, participation in technical work groups and sometimes even negotiation in consultative councils.

[2] *Étude sur l'efficacité des stratégies d'influence politique des ONG*, Mirjam van Reisen, EEPA.

[3] *La montée en puissance des acteurs non étatiques*, Christian Chavagneux, University of Sussex, Centre for Global Political Economy ; L'Économie Politique et Alternatives Économiques –

shortened and slightly amended version of a contribution by Christian Chavagneux to the Global Governance Report, 2002, n°37 published by the *Conseil d'analyse économique*.

[4] *Les coalitions internationales d'ONG, du lobbying à la contribution à la gouvernance mondiale*, Pierre Calame, January 2004 (<http://www.institut-gouvernance.org/fr/analyse/fiche-analyse-31.html>).

[5] From *Techniques de plaidoyer pour l'éducation et le développement* by the World Bank (extract translated by Groupe URD).
