

# Learning for effective advocacy

## Strategic learning about allies

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**Advocacy campaigning requires continuous organisational learning. In particular, allies need to learn about each other's interests, expectations and commitments. Laura Roper explains how to facilitate such a learning process.**

Advocacy is a dynamic and nonlinear process, built around influencing opportunities, dependent on the actions and reactions of multiple actors, whose interests, calculus and manoeuvres shift as a campaign unfolds.

One of the defining characteristics of campaigning is the need to work in alliances. Many NGOs working in alliance have scored major policy victories, both internationally and nationally, on issues ranging from human rights to environmental protection, to improving access to HIV/AIDS medications. That said, campaigners are often surprised at how much of their energy is taken up managing alliance dynamics. Alliance members bring different perspectives to a campaign depending on their organisational mandate, culture, capacity and expectations of the campaign. Issues often arise around who is driving the campaign agenda, and who makes final decisions on strategy and tactics.

There can be jockeying among alliance members for political space ? who is the legitimate representative of what constituencies, who has the right to speak for whom in which arenas? These tensions can be most obvious in global campaigns particularly if Northern organisations are significantly better resourced and networked in multilateral decision-making circles, but they are also present at national-level campaigns. While some level of debate within a campaign is healthy, there is a risk that the energy and attention of campaigners will be dissipated or diverted by internal dynamics, instead of being directed toward their external targets.

When contemplating engaging in an ambitious advocacy effort NGO's, aside from the essentials of good, phased planning and power analysis, would benefit from asset and interest mapping among key alliance or coalition members. A first cut is to look at why organisations are interested in the issue and what assets they potentially bring to the effort (e.g. research or media capacity, ability to mobilise). This is a standard procedure and is often done at the start of the first formal meeting of the core organisations working together on an issue. However, it is important to go deeper. Three areas to explore are:

- What do the participating organisations hope to achieve from their engagement in the collaboration from both strategic and institutional perspectives? It is important to diagnose whether organisations are entering the collaboration with shared, complementary or conflicting expectations.

- How strongly does each participating organisation feel about the issue, and what will this mean in concrete terms, such as the dedicated staff and financial resources required? It is important to establish a timeframe for expected results, the engagement of an executive director and/or senior management, and where the issue stands among other organisational priorities? This assessment will help participants to learn more about the other members, and to determine whether they are dealing with just one enthusiastic individual, or someone who has the full backing of his/her organisation.
- A third area to explore early on is each organisation's position towards negotiation and compromise. Who has a 'win or nothing' attitude? Who might be in it believing the best they can hope to achieve is a stalemate? Who is in it with an ideal goal, but is realistic about having to arrive at an acceptable outcome?

This exercise requires some time and good facilitation. It establishes a practice of open communication, takes a more holistic view of allies, and forces everyone to analyse their motivations and expectations. It also allows the campaign leadership to identify potential problem areas before they become full-blown conflicts, including rethinking the alliance strategy. The meeting should end with a set of mutual expectations, some ground rules among alliance members, a document identifying the assets each organisation can bring to the campaign, and (if possible now, but if not later) preliminary commitments.

This analysis should be further elaborated as part of the campaign planning process. A campaign should be specific about the particular role and commitment of each ally in each phase of the campaign, from early policy research and analysis, to awareness raising of the public and target groups, to mobilising to gain access to and influence decision shapers and makers, to proposal making and policy negotiations, to pushing for passage, and on to implementation.

This process will also help the group identify collectively which skills need to be either developed or brought in as the campaign unfolds, allowing for a more strategic, proactive and seamless process.

Finally, the asset and interest mapping should be revisited periodically ? after major events or before the campaign moves into a new phase ? to ensure that the campaign will prove to be a generative experience (learning new skills, expanding networks, developing better practice) for all the participants.

## Further reading

This article is drawn from Laura Roper (2007) *Assessing Campaigning from a Developmental Perspective*, paper presented at the annual conference of the American Evaluation Association, Baltimore, MD, November 2007.