



Transformative local advocacy

Enable the fullness of democratic effects to take place!

This document is an appendix to the [research report](#) '*Empowering local self-government – Cooperation between advocacy groups and local governments in Hungary, Poland and Romania*'. The research explores through a set of case studies the experiences and difficulties that advocacy organizations and informal initiatives face when seeking collaboration with local authorities. Moreover, it creates a new narrative of the transformative potential of local advocacy leading to bottom-up democratic reform. Building on this approach, we highlight recommendations from our interviewees about conducting a successful advocacy campaign that results in effective cooperation with local authorities.

What is advocacy and what is not?

Advocacy is the active promotion of a cause or principle with the aim to influence the decisions or the operation of political and social institutions. Advocacy is one of many possible strategies of community initiatives. On the municipal level, more than anywhere else, advocacy very often means cooperation between social organizations and local governments, rather than external influence on the decision-making process, pressure and persuasion (activism). At the local level, a conflict is usually a wrong way to start: sustainable results require constant efforts by citizens that shape the DNA of local governance.

Advocacy on the local level is rarely a one-shot deal. It is about being recognized as trusted peers who get their voices heard in the decision-making process. Advocacy is about creating the possibility of cooperation that may involve conflicts and politics. Identifying the common good and mobilizing the community and its representatives to collaborate for a shared goal is an important part of every local advocacy effort. Finding an individual solution to a problem, by providing a service that bypasses the decision-making process might be very effective, but it is not advocacy.

Advocacy campaigns on the local level almost always point beyond the concrete issue they aim to tackle. They have a transformative potential to support bottom-up democratic reform on a municipal level. They broaden the channels of public participation, institutionalize distrust via enforcing transparency measures, and enforce accountability of the political representatives in the public discourse. Transformative advocacy is about enabling the fullness of the systemic effects on local democracy to take place!

Making claims that matter

Advocacy is most needed when routine work, such as mobilization of volunteers, fundraising, and recruiting members for a community initiative, will not ensure a long lasting change. Advocacy efforts are almost always motivated by the awareness of community demands being ignored or ill-represented. The common rhetoric of civil-public partnership is that civil society can participate in the decision-making process, activists can be spokespersons for certain social groups, but only political actors can legitimately represent the local population with an official mandate granted by the electoral process. Advocacy groups can accept this framework and keep appealing to the goodwill of their local representatives or make representative claims themselves! Our research shows that advocacy groups actively make claims about themselves as representatives in well-defined cases and have a strong say in the whole political process by claiming certain practices to be legitimate or illegitimate.

It may sound radical, but advocacy groups usually are not into replacing representatives. They rather want to change the depoliticizing mindset and make claims about the legitimacy and the representativeness of the decision-making process. When making a claim, a certain degree of tension with the local government is a constant possibility, but instead of an antagonistic stance toward politics, civic organizations are more likely to negotiate their claim and secure recognition for their activity. By making a representative claim, you also depict – and in some sense, create – the concrete group you advocate for. Consider your claims, because it will be placed under scrutiny. Who do you represent, who else represents them? Which norm underpins your claim? Is this claim SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Time-bound) enough?

While on the one hand, you should describe the rightness of your cause based on evidence capable of proof; on the other hand, your claim must capture the imagination of your audience. As an advocacy group, capacity to enable social participation is your biggest asset. Mobilization makes your claim stronger: while in certain situations, you should act on behalf of your supporters, the best you can do is constantly create opportunities for involvement in your campaign. This is the perfect way to set a standard for the decision makers on how representation should look like. This democratic effect of your campaign might point beyond your short-term goals, and this is exactly the point of transformative local-level advocacy. Take these side effects seriously: improve the local democratic ecosystem, address the bottlenecks of advocacy efforts and amplify citizens' voice in policymaking. Sustainable results need constant dialogue, monitoring and evaluation. Use the buzz around your campaign to make your claims be a point of reference for new claims and a more vibrant community life!



Crafting an effective advocacy story

▶ STRATEGY

A key condition for doing successful advocacy is about having a clear vision and mission (corresponding to your claim), but also about having a strategic action plan. Crafting a strategy starts with understanding your problem and defining your claim in the macro environment it relates to. Below is a simple checklist that can be helpful when thinking about systemic solutions for issues that matter for a given community.

▶ GETTING STARTED

- Gather facts and data about the issue you are working on, use both quantitative and qualitative means of information and data gathering, and understand your problem in its complexity. Move beyond the usual suspects you reach out to.
- Look beyond your community and analyze how similar problems were dealt with in other places in your country, region or the world.
- Document and share the evidence gathered and make sure your community has the same or at least a similar understanding of the problem.

▶ TOWARDS A SOLUTION

- Work within your community and formulate a clear goal. Do not forget to involve those who tend to remain silent or find it hard to stand up for their needs and interests.
- Map all affected stakeholders; understand their positions in the ecosystem; identify potential partners and groups that have conflicting interests. Who among them is movable and who is likely not? Consult with local actors.
- Assess potential side effects of your action or mid- and longer-term consequences for the ecosystem.
- Formulate your claim. Ensure that it is backed by your community. Clarify your goals; aim for tangible results; set clear priorities within the context and your resources.

▶ EVEN A REVOLUTION IS A PROCESS

- Define the key steps needed to reach your goal. Set milestones that are ambitious but possible to achieve and draw a realistic timeline. Think of successes that keep you and your community motivated.
- Set your target above the acceptable compromise.
- Be prepared to adjust your plans to the changing environment and to take unexpected opportunities.
- Document the process; evaluate the work at milestones; share experiences with others.

▶ BUT HOW?

- Assess your resources, such as time, funding, and expertise. Tailor your strategy to these assets and identify shortcomings that can hinder success. Think in alternative tools: put a price tag on the activities!
- Define key roles and responsibilities of your team members; ensure accountability and clear and regular communication.
- Avoid dependency on single individuals and create common knowledge and opportunities for those eager to contribute to the process. Invest in learning and avoid spokespersonship.
- Understand the assets of your team members and ensure everyone is in a position to contribute with their expertise, while having the chance to learn and develop new skills.
- What vision do you have for the community – and how is your case a necessary part of that vision? Formulate the values you stand up for and that you apply to your own work as well.

▶ WITH WHOM

- Understand your potential partners, groups that have not been involved yet.
- Establish personal relationships, create joint experiences, test collaborations through micro projects before forming close alliances.
- Look beyond your locality and get in touch with organizations and experts from other parts of the world.
- Find unlikely allies, organizations in completely different fields but aligning interests, passions or similar challenges.
- Participation is your best tool to mobilize for your cause. Create as much possibility for participation as you can!
- Incorporate needs and interests of allies, form coalitions, but avoid establishing time-consuming and bureaucratic structures and institutions. Rotate responsibilities and ensure accountable and democratic decisions.
- Evaluate your alliances and be ready to rethink or leave them.
- Learn about your opponents, assess their weaknesses and vulnerabilities. Understand diverging interests among them.
- Don't forget that you work with people. Everyone has their own ways of working and collaborating. Be patient and respectful with others; be consequent and unbiased.

▶ COMMUNICATE

- Be visible. Make sure those who are interested in your cause can find you, know about you and your team and understand your goals.
- Make sure those who find you, remember you. This can be ensured by visuals, slogans and messages.
- Don't let others define or interpret who you are. Communicate your mission and identity clearly. Frame your issues in your own voice as you want others to see them.

- Document your work and activities to make them visible to others.
- Be transparent about your connections, about funding. Apply a higher standard of transparency for yourself than you would expect from others.
- Create narratives that make your cause understandable for different audiences. Test your messages.
- Share stories others can identify with and that help to relate to your work.
- Establish connection to the media. Find the outlets and journalists active in your field. Share your work, give feedback on publications, provide useful information and insight that can be easily processed and reused.
- Identify the best channels to reach your local / target audience. Be responsive to them.
- Open communication channels that you can sustain. Abandoned blogs and social media accounts are disappointing, as are unanswered messages.
- Host and foster debate on issues that matter between stakeholders.
- Connect to events and opportunities that can elevate your messages and cause.
- Don't let others hijack your agenda. Avoid being reactive, don't talk about what others want you to talk about, but push your own agenda.
- Elaborate both offline and online communications; reach out directly to target groups but assess your capacities. Direct personal communication is valuable but extremely time-consuming.

TRANSPARENCY AS A TOOL

- Request and gather information that is lacking but of public interest. Use FOI requests, surveys, reporting platforms.
- Learn about legal opportunities that you can use for strategic litigation or advocacy.
- Be responsible with data you gather; think about unwanted effects of publication, about the protection of personal data, especially data on vulnerable groups and individuals.
- Share data you have gathered with others; use open, machine readable formats; work with open-source codes.
- Translate complex datasets into understandable stories; explain your methodology; be frank about its shortcomings.

DON'T FORGET ABOUT FUNDING

- Work to establish diverse sources of funding. Don't be dependent on any donor.
- Draft funding principles and set thresholds for certain types of incomes or donations and revenues you cannot accept.
- Engage your members and constituents to become your funders.
- Look for other resources than money: In-kind contributions, volunteer work can be as useful as cash.
- Give feedback to your donors on your relationship.
- Be accountable to your donors and the public about your expenditures and decision making.
- Advocate for open and equitable funding schemes in your local government to counteract co-optation and dependency.
- Map donors and grants regularly, don't get comfortable with the funding you receive.
- Be ready to reject or negotiate funding if it diverts you from your strategy or if it risks your sustainability.

WORKING WITH LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

- Become knowledgeable on legislative processes, decision makers, and the timetable of the policy cycle. Stay informed about local legislation:
 - Follow legislative processes.
 - Study the schedule of events, decisions and legislation.
 - Attend council or town hall meetings.
 - Attend events where your local officials make an appearance.
 - Subscribe to local legislators' newsletters and give feedback.
 - Read local news that report about issues relevant to you.
- Understand particular interests of decision makers and think of these when forming your strategy.
- Understand constraints, challenges of municipalities think of solutions of mutual benefit.
- Balance constructive work and criticism depending on political environment and opportunities, but never forget about the democratic legitimacy of elected officials.
- Map conflicting topics and areas for potential collaboration.
- Create success stories of collaboration you can build on.
- Consider establishing formal relations if it helps to be taken seriously or to make accountable commitments.
- Never depend on a single partner, person, or organizational body. Be open minded with newcomers; appreciate good will and help building new competences.
- Set your own rules of collaboration. Draw red lines; avoid conflicts of interest.
- Decide if you are a service provider or a watchdog; or how to balance both activities.
- Evaluate collaborations; give feedback and be ready to withdraw if collaborations divert from their original goals.

DON'T FORGET WHO YOU ARE

- As advocacy groups become successful, they may tend to have growing self-interests. The need to sustain the group or organization should never turn into a key goal. Ensure that formal processes, operational activities remain on a sustainable level with the aim to support the community in reaching its goals.
- Make sure those involved in daily operations do not get detached from the community. Study local issues; remain embedded.
- Celebrate your successes with your supporters! Remember your wins and don't let anyone else – not even your allies – take credit for your actions.

Convince the mayor! Arguments for collaboration

“Local governance in Central Eastern Europe is at a crossroads. It will either lose its relevance or evolve into a pocket of democracy that actively invests in civic ecosystems to support a democratic renewal.”

Local governments are under pressure by the pandemic, overloaded by social and economic tensions caused by governmental centralization and globalization. So why do we expect from local governments to collaborate more closely with local civil society?

MEET THE FUTURE NEEDS

Activists are showing the way forward. They often embrace policy issues that are downplayed at the present but will be top priorities in 2-3 years. Listening to them is, above all, to solve a time-inconsistency problem and reconcile calendars. It will cause City Hall less pain in the future and save a lot of money with anticipatory solutions for future challenges. Create a civic sphere where these ideas can be played out, and you won't run a risk of inventing your brand-new solutions just before the next elections!

UNLOCK POLICY BLOCKAGES

Local governments have to mediate between the interests of several stakeholders. Very often, it creates long-term obstacles for optimal policy solutions that local politics would solve on paper, but in reality, it cannot. Transformative advocacy can rearrange the state of affairs, while decision makers can take a step back. Advocacy groups can make clashes of antagonistic interest groups go away by initiating new alternatives, unexpected alliances, underrepresented groups and new sources of solidarity. Activists can politicize socio-economic problems (such as air pollution) and stir up the public debate around them – and make the status quo reformable.

A NEW ANTI-AUTHORITARIAN NARRATIVE

In the era of technocracy on the one side, and populism on the other, democracy needs new conceptions. Local politics is still a domain where trust matters. Participation on the local level connected to global problems is one of the most promising cases of democratic renewal. Civil society can balance competition and cooperation, and it can help overcome political polarization. But only an autonomous civil society can do that – an instrumentalized one cannot. Technocratic ignorance and co-optation are undermining this democratizing effect.

REAL COLLECTIVE SOLUTIONS

People will follow the rules if they participate in their creation. They pay the taxes if they see where public money goes. Local governments alone cannot solve all the problems emerging on the local level because of the lack of capacity and funding. Civic crowdfunding, volunteering, community initiatives are addressing this gap. Collaboration between activists and municipalities can even tackle the problem of defective national-level regulations and bring real solutions. If you recognize social impulses, pay them public compliments; people will stay active in the future knowing that you appreciate their contributions! But if the municipality takes all the credit for civic actions without recognizing the role of those being represented at City Hall, those engaged will be isolated, burned out and will not trust the political process for a long time to come.