
Chapter 2:

WHY ADVOCACY MATTERS: THE CRUCIAL ROLE THAT NONPROFITS PLAY

We live in a world of budget and resource limitations, differing opinions, and conflicting priorities. Engaging in advocacy is an opportunity for nonprofits to share their priorities with the public, represent communities, advance policies, and promote funding of meaningful objectives.

Nonprofits engaging in advocacy work bring benefits to communities at large, and also bring benefits to the organization through opportunities of attracting greater attention and creating broader impact.

Preparing for the Long Game

Nonprofits that are connected to causes can provide a bridge between the abstractions of public policy and the lived experiences of those for whom policies are designed. Although governments may have tools to determine levels of client satisfaction, organizations that deliver programs can provide more thoughtful feedback on the way policies and programs are experienced on the ground.¹ For example, when John Stapleton, Innovation Fellow with the Metcalfe Foundation, was asked about the interaction between advocacy organizations and government, he stated that, contrary to popular belief, government tends to follow the lead of organizations that are rooted in community.² Since public consultations are a key feature to effective policy making, without the advocacy work and input of nonprofits, policymakers would miss out on the public input needed for evidenced-based decision making.

Providing a Different Lens

According to author and political scientist Roger Gibbins, policy advocacy on behalf of registered charities is a moral imperative that should be encouraged rather than constrained. In Gibbins' [address](#) at CCVO's 2018 Annual General Meeting, he reminded us that nonprofits "not only bring more voices to the policy table, but also different voices".³ Indeed, nonprofits provide a platform for those with diverse interests who might otherwise be silent, such as prisoners and parolees, or endangered species and animals suffering from inhumane treatment. Without the concerted effort of individuals and nonprofits dedicated to various causes, certain voices, especially the most vulnerable and underrepresented, may otherwise remain silent in the policy process. While recognizing the polarizing climate we live in, Gibbins emphasizes that there continues to be an increase in the "necessity for, and risks of, advocacy" work.⁴

Tracking Your Success

High-impact nonprofits may start out by providing important programs but may eventually realize that they cannot achieve large-scale social change through service delivery alone. Advocacy efforts have the potential to move the needle on longstanding challenges that have hindered a nonprofit's ability to move forward on its mission. Volunteers and donors may also be drawn to support a nonprofit working on systemic issues because of the possibility for broader impact and the potential to attract the attention of policymakers, community leaders, and influential figures. Advocacy work can strengthen the appeal of a nonprofit as it works towards a more diverse and effective approach to achieving societal impact.

Building Alliances

Real social change is seldom accomplished by organizations working alone. Advocacy work creates opportunities for organizations with similar objectives to come together and build alliances. Actively participating in formal and informal networks that advance an advocacy strategy is often the most effective way to reach a broader audience. When nonprofits come together to "think like a sector", they can avoid working in silos and capitalize on the benefits of a network approach to achieve greater impact.

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