HOW DO YOU KNOW YOU ARE MAKING A DIFFERENCE? ADVOCATES TALK ABOUT THE PUBLIC POLICY PROCESS[1]

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ADVOCATES AND ADVOCACY GROUPS IN THE NONPROFIT SECTOR IN CANADA get involved in the public policy process in a number of ways. The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC)2 funded a four-year research project involving nine groups to address the question of outcomes under the title "How do you know you are making a difference?" This article highlights the parts of that study that focus on public policy and the study findings on the direct impacts of public policy: changes in policies, laws or practices, citizen engagement, and changing or moving attitudes or the atmosphere around an issue. It then looks at some indirect impacts of the research, including the impacts on the functioning of the group itself, and the capacity development of those involved. The final section captures our analysis of what facilitates success in policy work, including such factors as effective analysis of the context and opportunities for input and influence, effective communication strategies, and collaborative and knowledge capacity within organizations.

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Along with the key question participants were also asked to tell us stories about activities they had engaged in that they regarded as successful and then probed this further by asking: "How do you know these activities were successful? What are the meanings of success or effectiveness in your work, and what are some of the factors or conditions that contribute to it?"

A staff member described progress on Oxfam Canada's "Fair Trade in Coffee" campaign this way:

> We were trying to draw attention to the exploitation of poor coffee farmers and the need for the coffee companies to take action. Really, there wasn't a lot of awareness – I think probably none – about Fair Trade coffee when we first decided that we would start campaigning on the issue. It must be ten years ago. We told people, "We're doing a public campaign to draw attention to how some of Canada's bigger coffee producers are benefiting from the current situation and are basically running sweat shops without walls." There were different actions that helped promote Fair Trade products across the country, drawing attention to the coffee business and how unsavoury it is. And we would have displays, we did media interviews, we talked to basically whatever group about the whole notion of coffee and the fact that there was this alternative, this Fair Trade coffee. And we started getting people to go into the coffee shops and restaurants and ask for Fair Trade coffee. Of course, we knew full well there wasn't any, but we would say to them, "Well, if you don't

> have any, you should consider getting it. Why don't you talk to… ?" Through this kind of continued, low-level campaigning, now it is almost impossible to go into a store and not find it. And by no means can we take credit for the fact that Loblaws or Dominion now [have] all these Fair Trade products. But I would like to think that we played a fairly significant role in getting it on the public agenda.

Public policy is one important aspect of what activists described when they talked about making a difference. While there are many other ways to think about what success in advocacy work means, here we will focus on the policy process and how and why it works, based on the words of activists themselves.

DEFINING ACTIVISM AND ADVOCACY

Words such as "activism" and "advocacy" can evoke different meanings. For our purposes, activism is defined as acting to bring about social, political, economic, or environmental change for a more just, sustainable, and peaceful world. Activism takes many forms. "Not only resistance and protest should count as activism, but also building relationships between people that foster change in the community" (Hodgson & Brooks, 2007, p. 20). Advocacy can be described as acting or speaking on behalf of others; it can also mean acting in solidarity with others or advocating on behalf of oneself or one's own group. Our participating groups and organizations span these definitions. Some focus on advocating on behalf of the general public, others work in solidarity with particular populations, while still others are self-advocates. Some involve a combination of these types of advocacy or even all three. Here we will use the words "advocacy" and "activism" interchangeably.

THE CONTEXT: FINDING THE SPACE FOR VOICE

In the context of free market ideology that advocates reduction in the size of government (including social services) and focuses on individual responsibility, the space for citizens to speak out on behalf of the collective or public good is being seriously eroded. The privatization of services is assumed to be more efficient, measured primarily in economic and business terms such as "return on investment." One result is a reduction of government support for nonprofit organizations, especially those that advocate for public policy change. In order for donations to be tax deductable, for example, registered charities must limit their policy advocacy work to 10% of their resources. This has had a chilling effect on public interest advocacy in Canada, as the "A" word becomes something to avoid if an organization is seeking government funding (Scott, 2003).

Accountability is another "A" word. In terms of public funding, organizations are expected to demonstrate "value for money"; that is, they are expected to "prove" that they are effective in concrete, tangible terms, and that taxpayer money is being well spent. This assumes a direct cause-and-effect relationship between what an organization does and an outcome that can be measured, usually quantitatively. A change in policy or a law can fairly easily be calculated in such terms, but the process of getting to that point is much more complex and less easily measured.

Activists talked a great deal about the more nuanced aspects of the policy process in their

discussions of what success means. Most of their work involves activities that cannot be measured in quantitative terms (at least not easily), yet are an essential part of the process.

ASSESSING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PUBLIC POLICY WORK

In the past decade there has been an explosion of interest in the effectiveness of advocacy work, as reflected both in academic and professional literatures and on the websites of activist organizations and funding agencies.[3] But two things are missing: the voices of activist themselves (The Innovation Network, 2008) and the identification of outcomes that are broader than specific policy change (Coffman, 2007; Guthrie et al., 2005; Miller, 1994; Miller, 2004). Most advocacy evaluation currently focuses on policy change, which Guthrie et al. (2005) describe as "too narrow" because it overlooks "the work building up to policy change and the implementation of policy once passed." Sometimes, what might appear to be a failure, such as "no new legislation is passed," may have other positive effects, such as the excitement and commitment generated for people not normally involved (Coffman 2007). Our work responds to these gaps.

WHO WERE THE PARTNERS?

As noted earlier, the research project involved partnering with nine deliberately diverse groups and organizations over a four-year period. They were:

1. a grassroots group of older women with no staff, no budget, and no organizational structure (Raging Grannies, Calgary),
2. a national environmental research/advocacy organization with a large professional staff (Pembina Institute),
3. a gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender youth group (Halifax Youth Project),
4. the national chapter of an international development advocacy organization (Oxfam Canada),
5. a Quebec-based social justice advocacy group focused on international issues (Social Justice Committee),
6. a high profile self-advocacy group of disabled activists (Disability Action Hall, Calgary),
7. a rural/aboriginal-based group promoting/validating remote, rural life (Storytellers' Foundation, Northern B.C.),
8. a national body advocating for the rights of children, which choses to remain anonymous, and
9. a provincial organization of addressing social justice issues (Alberta College of Social Workers).

What follows are excerpts from what activists told us, specifically focused on the public policy process.

DIRECT IMPACT: PUBLIC POLICY WORK IN ACTION

Changes in policies, laws, or practices

People told us they assess success in terms of specific concrete outcomes – changes in policies, practices, or laws in their own spheres of activity. For example,

> Canada did cancel the debts.…Yeah, it was a major success.

Or

> Finally we got [the accelerated capital cost allowance] removed from the federal budget in 2007. And by doing so, we put back in the pockets of Canadians … hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue.

Success was celebrated when laws were enacted: "to have inclusion of sexual orientation [in the Individual Rights Protection Act]" and policies changed: "McMaster and Guelph adopted a fair trade policy." For Alberta's social workers, achieving mandatory registration meant that the ethical obligation of their profession to pursue social justice was now enshrined in legislation:

> Being included in the Health Professions Act has given a voice to our clients that they didn't have without it.… The fact that six thousand social workers are under the legislation … and are accountable to the public we serve.

Sometimes, activist groups told us, they were fortunate enough to be able not only to influence changes in policy or regulations but also to observe the human and/or environmental impacts of these changes:

> The campaign was to get them kicking in more money in aid for education. And so it was very, very successful in making things happen. Lots of kids went to school as a result.

Participants frequently identified pitfalls related to characterizing only these observable or measurable types of outcomes as successes. Achieving change may mean "a long, slow process" from which they may never see the full results. Further, the concern was expressed that too much reliance on "measurable" outcomes might "force people to choose, as advocacy targets, quantifiable things that aren't necessarily systemic change."

Citizen Engagement

Democratic participation or citizen engagement was widely identified by activists as an end in itself. The level of success of this engagement is seen in the numbers of people participating, in who those participants are, and in the nature or quality of that participation. The numbers of people engaged was identified as an important outcome, especially in relation to public gatherings such as rallies or demonstrations and, of course, for signatures on petitions.

Regarding who is engaged, the diversity of people engaged in social justice activities was also widely valued:

> There will be First Nation kids, white kids, older people, all together. To me, I think that's just the most amazing part.

Many groups see it as important that people engaging in social action are not just "the usual suspects" or the ubiquitous hardcore activists:

> Marching down that street, that feeling in Calgary, with such a wide range of middle class people and people with children, … soccer mums. It was wonderful.

And,

> You begin to see those [ideas taken up by] … people who are calling into talk shows or people who are being interviewed on the street for the news.

Sometimes, even more than the numbers or identities of the people engaged, the nature or quality of people's engagement is celebrated. People told us they value risk-taking, non-violence, civility, collaboration, self-advocacy and, most importantly to some, just the fact that people are standing up and making themselves heard.

Engaging people of opposing views in civil public dialogue was considered a particular success by a member of the Social Justice Committee:

> A Canadian mine company is trying to build a gold mine in San Marco in Guatemala. We opposed it because the company has not consulted the local community. But the way we do it, we held a conference between four parties: the guy from the World Bank (this project is financed by the World Bank)…and then a representative from Friends of Earth and then the representative from the mining company, and also the Archbishop from that community in San Marcos. So four of them came together and then they had a conference. … And to me, something like that is especially good, because it brings people together, and people from different perspectives. Even though they don't agree with each other, but this is a place where they can exchange ideas, you know. And trying to understand better. … Just the fact that we could bring people together to talk about the issue, to me, it's a success.

Making one's voice heard can be seen as an important success in itself. Advocating for one's own and others' rights and publicly voicing one's opinion are highly valued as part of the policy process. One example involves children and youth:

> It was having kids' participation, kids at risk. They were kids out of the prison systems…and we were able to have young people put questions to the MPs, thoughtful questions. And questions that clearly reflected their falling through the system. You know kids who…came there out of detention programs.

Another involves engaging with issues internationally:

> In the 'For All' campaign on public services, we were promoting access to public services.… You know we have a group of students in St. John, who are willing to go on the street corner and sit on toilets on World Toilet Day, to talk about the importance of sanitation and get a pretty interesting picture on the front page of the paper.

Changing attitudes or the atmosphere around an issue

While shifting attitudes or the atmosphere around an issue may be seen as mainly a means to an end, for specific pieces of work this, in itself, is seen as a sign of the success of their efforts.

> There are two objectives we have. We set a particular policy objective. You know we say…this is what we want to change. And so, you measure success as to whether you change it or not.… Another major level … is the building of awareness and reaffirming of attitudes and beliefs broadly in society. And that's a long-term one that happens through a lot of different activities we undertake. But the campaign has to help move that along, and that's much more difficult to measure. But it's crucial, particularly over the long term.

Others emphasize the importance of their roles in framing and informing public policy debates:

> The fact that there was a public review process for us was a victory in that we had been calling for that to happen. And there were certainly certain elements of how the panel undertook its work that reflected our recommendations.

Also …

> When you start to see your messages as newspaper editorials that you had nothing to do with directly, you know you've gotten somewhere. That's when I knew we had made many breakthroughs on that issue. We started to see writers, we started to see other politicians, we started to see people talking about this issue in terms that we had framed it.

Still others mention their role in influencing government thinking:

> We did do the submission to the Senate Committee Report and got the Senate Committee Report to quote us. I mean that's one measure of success…How many times are you quoted in the report to which you made a submission? And we're well quoted.

Attracting media coverage is often mentioned as evidence of success: "We could see every night on the news…if we were successful, if we got media attention and our particular voice was heard. And it quite often was." One participant commented on connections among various layers of media:

> [An example of success is] launching a report that gets (a) good positive media coverage and (b) that even generates some debate and that appears as blogs on major media websites, for example. And (c) gets quoted by very reputable, well-known Canadian organizations in their own policy materials or at their events or when they're speaking to the media.

Media attention in itself is valued as a way of reaching people with a message. Fair, in-depth media coverage is considered even better:

> I think that [our organization was] able to help the media better understand and report on some of the complex implications of some of this. And put an analysis out that was more balanced and fair.

Bringing awareness to the general public constitutes success in the view of Oxfam Canada:

> Fifteen years ago, if you were to ask someone, "What is a sweat shop?" [the answer would have been] "I don't know." Whereas now, if you ask people "What is a sweatshop?" there is a fairly good idea about what a sweatshop is.

A member of the Pembina Institute talked about a campaign to raise awareness regarding the Alberta oil royalties regime:

> We identified over three years ago or so that the royalty system in Alberta was just not in the best interest…for the long-term success of Alberta. And so, we started raising awareness about that issue by publishing different papers on it, meeting with different influential people over time to raise their awareness about it. Writing opinion editorials in newspapers on it, getting some media coverage on it. And then, ensuring that it was brought up in our conversations with the different leadership candidates for the provincial PC Party. And then, that sort of became really mainstream.

INDIRECT CHANGES: HIDDEN DIMENSIONS OF EFFECTIVE PUBLIC POLICY WORK

Some aspects of effectiveness, such as how well the group or organization functions, or personal experience, may be less 'up front' but nonetheless essential.

Group functioning

Many participants referred to the importance of the functioning of their groups. Internally, participants talked about teamwork as one vital aspect of what made their organization's policy work effective.

> I think it was effective in showing how the coordination between our research and content staff and our people that have political and government experience and our communications team and our fundraisers, and how all those components of the team worked well together to create that change. So it was very effective from an internal perspective that way.

Externally, they discussed the significance of building networks. Collaboration among organizations was seen as essential to what effectiveness means.

> Make Poverty History, for example, that campaign which we were instrumental in starting. It hasn't achieved its major goals, its policy changing goals. But it's been hugely successful in building alliances among organizations, bringing people together and reaffirming attitudes and beliefs and mobilizing.

Importance of personal experience

The struggle for social justice can be difficult and discouraging work. People had interesting things to tell us about what keeps them going and what animates them in their activist work. For many, it was a feeling of "being part of something that's bigger than yourself"; "[when] you can see sort of a global movement – people taking action and that you're a part of that." Their commitment to making positive change in the world, along with a sense that they are joined in this by others, is a powerful combination:

> The passion of people involved - either volunteers or staff or participants – it's really about the cause and that is it. You know, it's not about anything else. So when people together, when they talk about stuff, there is always this energy in this environment. Like people are together doing something.

People told us they are further heartened in their desire to "do the right thing" when a "concrete" objective has been met. "There is a good feeling when you help make something happen, like a Starbucks recognizing Ethiopia's rights to their own brand names for coffee." Others spoke of a sense of belonging. One participant summed up what many felt about his organization: "One of the things this place offers … is a sense of community."

Sometimes that personal validation and acceptance morphed into a politicized involvement in the fight for social justice, in a shift of focus from the personal to the political:

> The Youth Project slowly built me up as a stronger individual, of being a LGBT youth and all of a sudden, the following year, I became…this big youth advocate for gay and lesbian students in my school.

WHAT FACILITATES SUCCESS IN POLICY WORK?

Analysis of the context to find opportunities for action

Throughout our various interactions with these activists, we were struck by how clearly they identified the importance of their ability to identify, analyze, and act strategically in relation to conditions in their environments. Conversations about relationships between broader social structures, local contexts, and individual experience were among the most passionate.

A stakeholder described how well his organization made these connections:

> The (organization) deals with social implications, they deal with economic implications, they deal with ecological implications, and they're very good at getting people to understand that all of these things are integrated. That, I think, is the fundamental biggest problem we have facing us in the future at the political level. Is that we've divided these three elements up in our minds, and we've not been able to integrate. We tend to focus on one element only, and forget about the rest. What (this organization) is able to do…is to get people to think in a more comprehensive and integrated way. It doesn't make the job any simpler, it just makes it more vital and the outcomes will be better if we start to look at them in a much more comprehensive way.

Activists also pointed out the importance of finding opportunities for action at a given point in time. Sometimes, it is a matter of taking advantage of an unexpected opportunity: "There was a new Minister…who was looking for something to hang her hat on and we got her at the right time." And sometimes considerable study and preparation is required:

> I mean first off, you have to actually analyze [the situation]. You have to step back and analyze who holds power, and which players directly influence decision-mak-

> ers who hold power. And the second thing you have to do is understand what buttons they have to push. You know, what are the interests the power holders have? …so that you're in a position to change their thinking by pressing the buttons. By understanding what their interests are and by figuring out how to deliver into those. And you can deliver into those by either withholding something they need or giving them something they need. So if they need credibility with the public you can destroy that credibility or take it away.… that's a negative way of influencing them. But…you're going to be better off if you provide a mix of positive reinforcement when people do something good and negative reinforcement when people do something bad.…You have to take that same type of thinking into work with either a corporation or a politician.…But the first thing is to just understand who holds the power and, secondly, understand what buttons are there to press to influence the decision-makers.

Organizational Culture

A related factor is organizational agility. This requires certain personal and organizational characteristics. This need for adaptability is essential but can be challenging:

> This organization is quite comfortable with uncertainty, which is rare. I mean, it's rare for individuals (and) rare also particularly for institutions.…It can be a very sort of stressful, frustrating place to work, because it's not always clear where we're going, what we've achieved, what's happened. But I think it's interesting…in the sense that a lot of what we advocate for, a lot of the kinds of solutions that we would like to see, require people to be more comfortable with uncertainty.

Communication

Most advocacy groups/organizations are constantly engaged in communication and building relationships as an overall strategy regardless of the specific current goal or campaign.

> [We] didn't even necessarily need to be taking action on the issue, but just having the discussion. I think that's important – creating spaces in order to build those relationships and open the door for communication and linkages is important.

A more informal kind of collaborative relationship was also identified as important:

> To see policy change, you need to have allies inside government…[with] civil servants, politicians or usually both. And you have to build your relationships with these people so that there's trust. And when I say allies, I don't mean formal alliances, I mean sympathetic. People who understand the issue and want to help move it forward.

MAKING MEANING: REFLECTION AND THE PROBLEM OF ACCOUNTABILITY

The public policy process is complex and not easily reduced to simple formulas or numbers. Here we draw attention to two issues that seem especially relevant to those working in complex contexts.

Contribution rather than attribution

As mentioned earlier, many organizations are called upon by funders as well as the public for measurable outcomes of their activities, in the name of accountability. Yet most work in constantly changing circumstances and in collaboration with others, so attributing any outcome to one group or activity would rarely be accurate. Referring to the lack of resources to examine the uncertainties of their efforts when planning programs and projects, Ramalingam and Jones (2008) lament that "the pressure of accountability to donors or the public may not allow for such uncertainties to be honestly and openly addressed" (p. 66). Activism and advocacy are complex activities, and more so when working closely, or in parallel ways, with other groups (Lindquist, 2001; Pestieau, 2003; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1999).

Many advocacy groups acknowledged the impossibility of knowing whether any given event or action actually "causes" a result. Inevitably many forces, conditions and players are involved and it is thus difficult to credit a successful outcome to any one cause.

> When we define success … it is changing government policy. Changing bad policy into good policy. Now the problem with that is there's always an attribution question, so we can play a role in that, but there are so many other roles.… You could have a really progressive Prime Minister, you could have huge public concern, and again, environmental groups can play a role in that, but they're only [a] part.… You could have a spate of news media stories … a huge number of factors that go into a political decision. (Ramalingam & Jones, 2008, p. 66)

A shift in attitudes is needed by both organizations and funders on this issue. The concept of contribution fits far more appropriately and accurately than attribution in complex contexts. As time- and resource-consuming as it may be to step back and reflect on how to address this question, it is essential if our work is to make real differences

The importance of reflection

For fast acting relief, try slowing down (Lily Tomlin).

Taking time to reflect on the systems in which we operate is, sadly, usually considered a luxury (Menzies, 2005). Many activists described time for reflection as a desperate need and the lack of it a source of frustration. Some organizations do manage to build in processes such as reflecting or debriefing into the routine of their work. Ramalingam and Jones (2008), acknowledging the complexity of any given context, urge "practitioners, policy makers, leaders, managers and researchers (to) all stop and collectively reflect on how we are thinking about trying to solve … problems" (p. 65). In a similar vein, Patton (2010) argues that reflective practice is not only essential to understanding what's going on in a process as complex as public policy, but also deepens relationships among too often disconnected participants.

CELEBRATING OUR WORK

Too often we get bogged down in the slowness of the process or the uncertainty of our results. One participant urged us all to remember to celebrate:

> I actually think we're at our best [when] there's something that we've … been involved in that we have perceived [ourselves] as having won – a victory or that we've done something very well. You know we've worked together well at it, so it could be the way all parts of the organization pulled out all stops to work around the tsunami, for example. It could be when we look at some of the work that we've done around advocacy, where we've seen changes happen at a particular level – be it our own federal government, be it at the WTO level. And I think that we realize we worked hard, we were deliberate, we worked collaboratively and we achieved something.… It may not have changed the world, but we achieved something that we set ourselves out to and we can celebrate it.

NOTES

1. This article has been drawn from our forthcoming book *Activism that works*, to be published by Fernwood in the spring 2011.
2. We are grateful to the Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) for their funding of this research.
3. See, for example, Chapman, 2002; Chapman & Wameyo, 2001; Coffman, 2009; Klugman, 2010; Masers, 2009; Ranghelli, 2009; Raynor, York, & Sim, 2009; Reisman, Gienapp, & Stachowiak, 2007; Ringsing & Leeuwis, 2008; Stephens, 2009; *The Evaluation Exchange*, 2007; Young & Everitt, 2004.

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