



Advocacy in the field of social rights: A story with a bittersweet conclusion

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Summary

This paper illustrates an inherent problem for any organisation carrying out advocacy — how to evaluate its impact? And more specifically — how to assess the extent to which one organisation's advocacy activities have contributed to overall policy change at the national level?

Advocating for housing opportunities: implementing a four-stage strategy

In 1998, the Eastern Europe Center for Democratic Education and Governance², a now-defunct Budapest-based NGO, with the support of the Pew Charitable Trust launched a national campaign aimed at improving housing opportunities for young people — a key topic in social rights advocacy. The problem definition was that accessing reasonable housing opportunities was a highly unattainable goal for the vast majority of young people in Hungary, and that this had in turn become a source of further social problems such as family problems, due to generations living together unwillingly or problematic marriages made mostly to run away from home.

The campaign involved four distinct stages. The first three centred on the *development of policy goals*:

- Policy research by the Center, resulting in a policy paper with three broad policy choices regarding future developments;
- The organisation of 18 forums around the country to explore people's needs and preferences, and gather the input of the relevant stakeholders to the policy paper;
- The elaboration of the paper on the basis of this input.

The fourth stage followed up on the role that the forums already played in mobilising public and civil society participation in housing rights, *policy advocacy*:

- The organisation of a major, national consultation forum to present and deliberate on the paper's recommendations, attract public attention to the issue and kick-start public advocacy to ensure implementation of the recommendations, involving key policy players (from the national government, local government and business) into the process.

Drafting of a policy paper: Identifying key policy choices

The first stage of the campaign involved policy research on housing with particular attention to the housing situation for young people in Hungary, which resulted in the production of a policy paper. This paper put forward three broad policy choices regarding the future development of national housing policy for the youth:

- Choice 1: Re-establishing State responsibility in the field of housing.
- Choice 2: Redefining the role of local government in the rent-based public housing sector. After the massive privatisation of the council flats in the 1990s, local governments should again appear in the rent sector.
- Choice 3: Introducing a widely accessible public rent system for young people that would be available for only two or three years.

Organisation of local and regional forums: Involving the public and stakeholders

The Center then organised 18 forums around Hungary with the goal of finding out more about the target population's needs, preferences and values, and also, more broadly, to encourage public deliberation as a key means of democratic-self governance. Forum sites included major cities, smaller towns and several districts in Budapest, with forum sizes ranging between 15 and 50 participants. The forum participants were mostly interested individuals, representatives of NGOs active in the area of housing, representatives of the municipal local government, and business people (mostly representing banks and insurance companies).

The agenda of each forum was organised around a discussion document prepared by the Center, which outlined the main facts and policy structures relevant to the debate, together with a short assessment of the three proposed policy choices. In each forum, the outcome of the discussion was a list of the main concerns of the group in question, and suggestions for action.

Updating the policy paper: The concept of shared helplessness

The forums yielded wide-ranging input, describing various interlocking and conflicting needs, interests and values. Based on this material, and with the help of housing policy experts, the Center then prepared an updated policy paper that incorporated the main findings and recommendations of the public forums.

The key revelation of the forums was an emerging sense of "shared helplessness". Business representatives complained about the absence of appropriate legal and financial frameworks, which could enable them to establish an accessible general mortgage system. National government policies revealed that the Government had neither the resources, nor the intention, to reintroduce a purely State-funded housing project. Participants at the forums complained that a citizen with an average salary needed to put aside his or her full monthly salary for about 80 years to be able to buy a flat. Local governments highlighted that the highly centralised financing system of the municipal self-governments simply allowed them no space to operate in such a resource-sensitive area as housing development.

The updated policy paper was therefore structured around this concept of "shared helplessness", pointing out that none of the relevant actors was able, individually, to initiate a breakthrough in the field of housing development for young people. However, based on the analysis of a few successful initiatives from around the country, the policy paper nonetheless suggested that these various forms of shared helplessness also in fact constituted a network of non-utilised resources and opportunities. There seemed to be groups of people willing to make some sacrifices in order to alleviate the housing situation — not just financial sacrifices, but also in terms of devoting time and energy to finding the best solution. For example, business representatives had an interest in setting up a mortgage market in Hungary, while the local and national governments had an interest in pleasing their voters.

The final, updated policy paper therefore outlined — in around 18 main points — a housing policy that incorporated the interests and resources of all the interested parties: residents, local governments, banks, insurance companies, real estate developers, and the national Government.

Advocating policy change: A national consultation forum on housing opportunities

In December 1998, the Center organised a major public event in Budapest — a national consultation forum to advocate for the main policy initiatives developed in the policy paper. Over 100 participants included representatives of the local forums, business people, policy experts, NGO representatives, mayors, and six representatives of the national Government, representing three key ministries (Finance, Social Affairs and Labour). The forum was addressed by President Árpád Göncz, Hungary's first democratically elected president, who served as an honorary Chair of the housing initiative.

Partly because of the presence of national politicians, all the major television and radio channels and broadsheet newspapers sent their reporters to the event. The key element in the five-hour agenda was small group discussions, moderated by the Center's staff, focusing on various aspects of the Center's policy proposal

Advocacy impact

A day after the event, the moderators of the group discussions convened to assess the results of the work of their group. The results seemed unanimously sobering. Government representatives (department chiefs and an assistant secretary from the Ministry of Labour) highly welcomed the initiative. But they had also pointed out that although the newly elected Government had a publicly announced interest in launching a major new housing initiative, the action framework proposed by the Center would place an unbearably large burden on the State.

However, less than six months later, in May 1999, the Government launched a major new housing policy initiative. The programme had three pillars: State contributions that would finance a significant part of the mortgage interest; the strong interest and activity of banks and insurance companies in participating in an anticipated housing boom; and the participation of hundreds of thousands of young people and young families, who would finally have the chance to benefit from an accessible mortgage programme, which would offer relative advantages for people under 35 with children.

People who had kept in touch after the end of the Center's housing campaign were happy about this major initiative in housing policy, but were also baffled. The majority of the 18 points in the Center's policy paper could be recognised in aspects of the Government's housing programme. If the strategies of the Government's May 1999 housing programme were clearly in line with those of the Center's public initiative, why had Government representatives rejected the Center's proposal just five months before?

Conclusions

This story about advocacy in this one specific field – housing – offers a few interesting general conclusions. The first conclusion is rather sad. When an advocacy initiative clashes with the Government's political or electoral interests, in most cases the initiative will fail. In the case of the Center's housing project, it seems likely that the Government officials who participated in the consultation forum were exactly aware of the structure of the new Government's initiative that was being developed, but that their role and duty did not allow them to publicly reveal anything about it and share the initiative with other players.

The second conclusion is more promising. Although the Center's initiative was formally unsuccessful, one can nonetheless notice a phenomenon relevant from the viewpoint of deliberative politics. The voice of the public, expressed in the local forums and the national conference, had helped to shape a new public policy that was to make a real difference. The Government's 1999 housing policy has brought about a real breakthrough in housing; it has created access to affordable housing for young people. The Government played an important role in this process, especially by financing mortgage interest, but its contribution constituted more than just a giveaway. A mortgage market has sprung up in Hungary, and the subsequent competition among banks has lowered interest rates. The programme was followed by a significant boom in the building and construction industry, which in turn caused further booms in the related construction material industries. Although the housing project was expensive, it has contributed to Hungary's transformation to capitalism.

The housing project was introduced by the Government, but one should not forget that its major structural contours were envisioned previously by a democratic process based on citizen participation and professional advocacy. Even though the Government did not want to share its housing policy initiative at the time (based on the reasonable expectation that it would be able to use it to maximum electoral effect at a later stage), subsequent developments showed that professional advocacy based on informed citizen participation can (with a little luck!) indeed make a difference in a democratic polity.

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² The Center had two major goals: (1) Producing school materials for civic education in public schools for classes 5-12; (2) Facilitating community development through organising local public forums on national issues (for example NATO membership) or local issues (e.g. unemployment in a particular town).