



Postcard from the Frontline:

Lessons Learned in the Battle for Hearts and Minds in the New Europe

Mercedes Sprouse¹

Summary

The author draws on her experience working as a consultant, both for CSOs across Central and Eastern Europe and for programmes and foundations of the Soros Foundations Network, to outline a model skills set that CSOs of all shapes and sizes may use to sustain results. The paper illustrates proven strategies and tools to carry out and evaluate advocacy interventions. The essential message: Civil society organisations (CSOs) need to work smarter, not harder.

Towards an Advocacy Toolkit

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) are, essentially, idea brokers. They identify gaps and constraints, and propose solutions to influence the political climate, policy and programme decisions, public perceptions, and funding decisions. Advocacy² involves well-planned and coordinated actions that engage like-minded groups around a common cause. These actions arise from a set of skills that when employed at the right time under optimal conditions, guarantee success.

The irony is that no amount of state-of-the-art tools or complex methods can help smaller CSOs³ achieve results better than common sense can. The outcome of their advocacy will be determined by their ability to envision and clarify the objective, sense its context, pay attention to stakeholders' input, and converge and mobilise resources. That is just the first step: strategic planning. During implementation, CSOs must make strategic use of other inter-connected skills: communications; stakeholder relations; media relations; Government relations; coalition-building; the use of 'champions' or ambassadors for their cause; grassroots actions; partnership-building; and negotiation⁴.

Experience in evaluating advocacy and campaigning in Central and Eastern Europe indicates that smaller CSOs need only work 'smarter', not harder, to achieve an impact. Whilst numerous examples of good practices abound, the few cases below, drawn from my experiences working with foundations and programmes of the Soros Foundations Network and other CSOs, illustrate the skills set vital to any advocacy toolkit.

Strategic Planning

One case, in particular, demonstrates the profound importance of strategic planning. In 2002, several CSOs merged to form "Initiative Fifth Woman"⁵ in Slovakia. From the outset, they created a planning committee and advisory council broadly representing virtually every type of expertise one could imagine being beneficial to an advocacy campaign: grassroots activists, social scientists, political scientists, psychologists, parliamentary and Government representatives, survivors of abuse, journalists, publicists, advertisers, graphic illustrators, sponsors, and fundraisers, among others. Together, they shaped the core message of the campaign. Research indicated that every fifth woman in Slovakia was likely to be abused. That was the only message, repeated in all communications and in every media form. The organisers designed an action plan well in advance of the campaign, which emphasised a series of coordinated steps that reinforced each other. The campaign introduced the concept in a series of professional billboards and public service announcements (social advertisements) on radio and television, followed by roundtable discussions, street actions, concerts, petitions, and finally, political lobbying. The result: unprecedented in-kind contributions from media professionals, overwhelming public attention focused on the issue, dramatic increase in requests for assistance from survivors, Parliamentary Committee debate, legislation drafted and passed in

Parliament. The moral of the story is that the CSOs did not attempt to carry out every component of the campaign by themselves. They planned appropriately, which contributed to their success in attracting stakeholders and professional support.

Communications

In Croatia, everyone knows about the women's rights group B.A.B.E.⁶. That is because when B.A.B.E. wants to get a message across, every member of the organisation, its Board, its associates and affiliates is generally reading from the same script. A long-standing actor in human rights promotion, particularly gender issues, B.A.B.E. places itself everywhere at once: in multiple media and through grassroots actions. Their award-winning public service announcements have been translated and transferred to other countries for use in similar campaigns. This type of coordination and relationship-building took years to develop. Yet the key to B.A.B.E.'s success has been in the simplicity and consistency of its message, as well as the synchronisation of its communications with partners.

Stakeholder Relations

Target groups, participants and beneficiaries are integral components of every advocacy intervention. Without a clear idea of those who can influence change, those whose lives intersect with social transformation processes and those affected by social change, advocacy falls short.

In 2001, EUMAP launched the first CSO monitoring of judicial independence and minority protection in the then-accession States.⁷ The Open Estonia Foundation⁸, Soros Foundation Latvia⁹, and Open Society Fund-Lithuania¹⁰ held a series of stakeholder briefings before, during and after the monitoring to shape main findings and recommendations. They facilitated national expert networks and connected those expert practitioners to groups whose work traversed each stage of the policy process. Others whose interests interconnected found an opportunity to provide inputs to the monitoring process. This multiplied the effect. In Lithuania, a special parliamentary hearing convened to debate the findings in an unprecedented recognition of CSO monitoring, which later resulted in changes to the Law on Courts. In Estonia, main findings and recommendations found their way onto the agendas of virtually every representative body tasked with its implementation. In Latvia, the inclusion of stakeholders from beginning to end sustained extensive debate and led to important policy recommendations.

Media Relations

Media relations involve more than working with journalists. CSOs must be prepared to advocate their cause in multiple platforms: television, radio, newspapers, Internet-based journals and forums, and magazines. CSOs must be open to other opportunities that have emerged with the digital age: SMS/MMS campaigns and special software for electronic advocacy. Strategic use must be made of alternative media: community radio, travelling art exhibitions, electronic billboards, postcards and other products that communicate the message effectively to the intended target group.

In 2005 a newly formed global networking CSO, called Mobile Active¹¹, brought activists from around the world to Toronto to explore the use of mobile phones in civic action campaigns. These activists enhanced ways to contribute to pivotal swing votes in election campaigning. They used mobile phones to monitor elections to help ensure impartiality. Other SMS campaigns sought to free political prisoners, advocate environmental preservation or influence health prevention. Telecommunications providers are increasingly receptive to supporting social action campaigns by donating and coordinating services.

CSOs must recognise ways to do more with less. Ideally, the executive, staff, Board and volunteer associates of the CSO should be actively networking to bring together other like-minded individuals around the common cause. Media relations therefore become a matter of knowing which strategy to use at the right time. Good practices from across Central and Eastern Europe include study tours, internships, breakfasts, and special events. They help to nurture relationships with media professionals and imbue the essence of the cause, as does the inclusion of prominent media experts and professionals on the Board. The inherent lesson here is that media outreach is an ongoing,

integrated process in the advocacy strategy, which begins well ahead of the intervention. Otherwise, the intervention, and any toolsets or publications produced therein, will have little lasting effect.

Government Relations

Traditionally, CSOs tend to shy away from approaching Government institutions and/or the executive branch directly, favouring instead the approach of including Government representatives in a planned event or launch of a publication. If the objective is to create publicity, the CSO may follow that path indefinitely. However, the moment the CSO intends to engage in policy advocacy, its strategy must change. It is now a lobbyist, and the rules of engagement are different.

The resources to advocate within and among Parliament and parliamentary committees, Government institutions, as well as Government service providers and suppliers are to be found within the CSO and the associates it surrounds itself with. The CSO must ask: Who among its staff, Board, consultants, volunteers and associates is a highly skilled, exceptionally persuasive communicator, one who can navigate the culture and capacities of government institutions at central and local levels? Government relations are, in the end, a question of inter-personal communication.

The Stefan Batory Foundation¹² in Poland drew upon the full reach of its resources nationwide to contribute toward important progress in the Polish accession process during 2003-2004. Together with its partner, the Polish NGO Platform, the Foundation facilitated the first networked NGO in Brussels to lobby EU institutions for Polish interests, primarily in the agricultural sector, whilst providing national support for the process concurrently.

Similarly, the Centre for Women's Rights (Centrum Praw Kobiet) in Warsaw is both an intervention centre and lobbying group initiated to enhance gender equality in legislation and policies.¹³ The CSO deploys associates to lobby Government institutions at all levels, using a network of local advocates and individual briefings to get the message across. Each advocacy intervention strives to involve Government representation at the highest level. Its approach led to a series of fundamental changes in Polish legislation over the past five years.

In Lithuania, the Human Rights Monitoring Institute¹⁴ initiated a barrage of debate in parliamentary and Government circles following the release of its disturbing report on the flagrant abuse of privacy in the country in 2004.¹⁵ The countless hours of debate and testimony, which its efforts resulted in, contributed to the revamping of numerous Government policies and legislation. Moreover, unaware of the potential illegality of public surveillance, corporations have adapted the Institute's recommendations as well.

Coalition Building

In a process that took over three years, CSOs in Georgia developed a 300-member coalition and established international focal points for counterparts in Azerbaijan and Armenia. The CSO Women Aid International¹⁶ transformed loose national coalitions into a sub-regional collaboration advocating against trafficking, and on public health, environment and gender issues.

In Southeast Europe, local public institutions seeking to enhance access to information and empower vulnerable and disadvantaged groups discovered that public mistrust could present a nearly insurmountable obstacle to their efforts to raise awareness of basic human rights, public health and education. To deal with this challenge, the local public institutions (libraries, local government, schools) involved local NGOs and volunteers in a new initiative, the InfoBus project.¹⁷ They engaged the entire communities of five separate municipalities in the process of identifying solutions for residents to work their way out of desperate situations.

Building partnerships involves engaging a wide range of actors in development solutions. Successful advocacy also entails being prepared to go beyond traditional forms of cooperation to include businesses, individuals and local public institutions in taking responsibility for solving community concerns.

'Champions'/Ambassadors

In Hungary, Roma-led advocacy prompted perhaps the most far-reaching governmental reforms in all of Europe.¹⁸ In 2002, a Romani woman, Viktória Mohácsi, became the ministerial commissioner responsible for promoting the integration of Roma into the schooling system. She subsequently became the first Roma Member of the European Parliament, soon followed by Livia Járóka, who was elected in 2004, becoming the second representative of the 14 million Roma living in European countries.

But champions come in different guises. Charity concerts are becoming an increasingly popular tool across the region, with CSOs encouraging celebrities to perform at concerts or theatre events to both promote a cause and raise funds for it. At these events, CSOs in many countries have succeeded in recruiting celebrity athletes, singers and other famous personalities to lend patronage, which has helped them to attract larger audiences. In partnering with corporations and service providers, CSOs can share the costs and responsibilities of organising such events.

Grassroots Actions

Grassroots actions seek to hand over power to the community, as their actions are local rather than global, and individuals participate fully in the decision-making processes, rather than merging those interests into a larger organisation. NGOs across the region have experienced positive results with simple tactics to encourage community participation. Spontaneous debate clubs, roller blade street actions, and other highly visible events could complement an overall campaign strategy when the objective is to demonstrate a high level of public support. Good practices in grassroots actions can be found in every country.

Negotiation

Negotiation is often overlooked in the arsenal of advocacy skills every CSO executive may employ to sustain impact. Yet negotiation is, perhaps, a vital skill for persuading potential partners to collaborate on development solutions. Needs can range from free broadcast time for social advertisements and donations of goods and services to the provision of space and materials and the organisation of special events. The key to sustained success is to persuade supporters to become partners in the process rather than to merely view them as sponsors.

CSOs in Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo and Macedonia, working with their partners, persuaded telecommunications service providers to donate equipment and free Internet access time to help residents of under-developed former conflict zones log onto the Internet for the first time and access training opportunities.¹⁹ In Montenegro, in 2001, the CSOs League for Family and Medialink persuaded the Postal Service to issue a postage stamp to support efforts to end violence against women. All across Central and Eastern Europe, CSOs are becoming increasingly effective in persuading editors and media managers to donate free advertising space or broadcast time in media campaigns.

Evaluating Advocacy Impact

The model of skill sets mentioned here should be seen rather as an *a-la-carte* menu of possibilities. The combination of ingredients chosen at the right time would make for a scrumptious gourmet meal. Isolated, the effect might be found wanting. Moreover, the proposed skills set and good practices, by no means exhaustive, cannot assist CSOs in answering the larger question: To what extent do advocacy campaigns make an impact?

To determine impact, professional evaluators may employ a range of quantitative and qualitative tools to assess strengths and weaknesses before or during the campaign, measure direct outputs of the campaign, analyse the effects of a campaign on specific groups, or assess the ways in which the campaign contributed toward achievements of a goal.

Smaller CSOs need only answer two essential questions: Did attitudes change as a result of the intervention? Did behaviours change as a result of the shift in attitudes?

For example, saying that “drugs can maim you for life” in itself is not enough to persuade youth to abstain. In fact, the message may be so strong as to force the audience into denial. By adding a complementary theme, which illustrates better ways to live, the audience might be more encouraged to actually take steps to change negative behaviours.²⁰ In fact, the entire culture of personality surrounding the issue must reflect the desired changes.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the political, societal and economic conditions of the moment may determine the outcome of advocacy interventions. To a certain extent, CSOs can accommodate these conditions in the strategic planning stage, though success is never guaranteed. The essential underlying message here is that, regardless of their size or means, CSOs can achieve sustainable results through collaboration with a wide range of actors and by drawing on the strategies mentioned above. Good practices abound in every country. CSOs can learn from each other to develop the formula that works best for them.

¹ Since 1999, Mercedes Sprouse has worked as a consultant for Open Society Institute (OSI) Network Programs and CSOs across Central and Eastern Europe on communications, advocacy and development issues. The former journalist emphasises collaborative partnerships in the uplifting of democratic standards, and the empowerment of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups. Her clients include the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). In Lithuania, Mercedes advises the Human Rights Monitoring Institute and serves as President of the International Women's Association of Vilnius, a CSO that facilitates the contribution of the international community to the empowerment of women and youth. Mercedes is based in Vilnius, Lithuania. E-mail: msprouse@osf.lt; Tel. +370.61743028.

² The term is terminally confusing. Advocacy draws on an eclectic combination of principles originating in social psychology, public relations, marketing and mass communications, and the subtle art of persuasion.

³ This paper addresses issues faced by CSOs operating with fewer than five staff and consultants, and which rely on minimal funding to carry out projects.

⁴ Additional discussion within the context of ending violence against women can be found in: M. Sprouse, *Media Advocacies to End Violence Against Women*, Budapest, Open Society Institute, 2002. Available: http://www.osi.hu/vaw/files/2001_16daysfinalwebreport.pdf.

⁵ See: <http://www.piatazena.sk/engl/iniciative.htm>. For additional information, browse: <http://www.osi.hu/vaw/propbycount.php?count=slovakia>.

⁶ See: <http://www.babe.hr>.

⁷ Report publications on judicial independence and minority protection can be found at <http://www.eumap.org/reports>.

⁸ See: <http://www.oef.org.ee/en>.

⁹ See: <http://www.sfl.lv>.

¹⁰ See: <http://www.osf.lt>.

¹¹ Their stories are recorded on a Wiki website. See: <http://www.mobileactive.org>.

¹² See: <http://www.batory.org.pl>

¹³ See: <http://www.cpk.org.pl/pl.php5/on/home>.

¹⁴ See: <http://www.hrmi.lt>.

¹⁵ For HRMI publications on the right to respect for private life, see <http://www.hrmi.lt/en/project.php?strid=1044&id=2066>.

¹⁶ See: <http://www.womenaid.org/caucasus>.

¹⁷ See: <http://www.infobus.org>.

¹⁸ B. Rorke (Director of the Open Society Institute's Roma Participation Program), "Civic advocacy: Desegregation", in remarks to Conference on *Roma and Equal Access to Education: From Segregation to Integrated Schooling*, Brussels, 28 - 29 April 2006.

¹⁹ In negotiating implementation logistics for the InfoBus project, local public institutions collaborated with national Soros foundations to persuade the Ministries of Culture, Finance and Telecommunications to grant exceptions to regulations that would otherwise force CSOs to pay excise taxes. Fund for an Open Society Serbia and Foundation Open Society Institute in Macedonia also helped the local partners to seal a commitment from internet service providers to underwrite costly internet access for a lengthy trial period. See: <http://www.infobus.org>.

²⁰ Excellent resources in communications evaluation include: Communications for Social Change Consortium (<http://www.communicationforsocialchange.org>) and The Communications Initiative (<http://www.comminit.com>).