

## Managing risks in advocacy

### Key messages:

- **Advocacy does come with some risks, and it's important to venture into advocacy aware of these.**
- **Potential risks might arise for example from choice of advocacy tactics, working with certain partners, use of unreliable evidence, the political environment and so on. Decision to speak out or not on sensitive/politicized issues may also damage a CSO/VOPE's reputation and credibility.**
- **Robust planning and analysis are the foundations of risk management in advocacy. It requires in-depth understanding of the evaluation advocacy issue, the political and policy context, and the target audience. Paying close attention to messages and message delivery can lower the risk in politically charged situations.**
- **Good leadership, communication and collaboration are essential to make the careful judgment required to balance all the relevant factors.**

Challenging power and lack of transparency through advocacy can be risky, potentially resulting in backlash and conflict in some cases. Although to some extent unavoidable, it is important to consider risks, challenges and potentially negative situations when planning advocacy for evaluation and before you engage in any advocacy activities<sup>1</sup>. Moreover even though your advocacy arena may be potentially without risks, taking a strong stand on promoting evaluation may put some stakeholders at risk.

It is always hard to decide whether it is more important to speak out strongly and risk going against the authorities, or to stay silent and risk losing legitimacy by not standing up for your members and constituents. Such decisions must be made collaboratively, in ways that keep members and constituents on board. In everything you plan to do, you must consider the impact of your advocacy actions on all the stakeholders to make sure they are not exposed to any unnecessary risk.

Potential risks might arise from your choice of tactics, especially those that involve public actions and events. This may lead to damage to reputation; damage to relationships (with stakeholders, partners or government); undermine the CSO/VOPE's legitimacy. In extreme cases it may also lead to physical harm and financial loss arising from litigation, for example. Working in coalitions and partnerships may involve the risk of loss of distinctive identity and of quality control. Partnerships with political associations can bring in added risks.<sup>2</sup>

However, there are several ways you can **minimize the risks** that can be associated with advocacy. Most important are:<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Toma C., (2012). *Advocacy Toolkit: Guidance on how to advocate for a more enabling environment for civil society in your context*. Open Forum for CSO Development Effectiveness.

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Gosling L., Cohen D. (2007). *Participant's Manual: Advocacy Matters – Helping children change their world*, International Save the Children Alliance.

<sup>3</sup> Sprechmann S., Pelton E. (2001). *Advocacy Tools and Guidelines Promoting Policy Change*. CARE.

**Making informed judgments** - When you are selecting an advocacy issue, you should be able to make informed judgments about what kind of advocacy risks are acceptable, and in which situations you will back off.

**Carefully planning your initiative** - Good planning and analysis are the foundations of risk management in advocacy. The more you understand your issue, the political context, and your target audience, the less room you have for error.

**Reliable evidence** is the foundation for advocacy, and it must stand up to scrutiny. Using unreliable evidence is very risky. Evaluation that provides evidence must follow high quality standards. It should highlight the causes and solutions to a problem, and quality checks should ensure that the assumptions and conclusions drawn are valid and strong. This requires CSOs, VOPEs and stakeholders to strengthen the supply of evaluations as well.

During the policy analysis stage, you will learn about decision-making processes and its key actors. This stage is also an opportunity to learn about any risks involved in advocacy. During your policy analysis, you can explore questions such as:

- Are the officials you are targeting corrupt?
- Are others involved in this policy debate dangerous or dishonest?
- Will you have any allies to help you if you run into trouble?
- Has political violence surrounded public debate on your issue?
- Have others suffered for raising similar concerns?

Later, when you are working on your advocacy strategy, you will be choosing among different advocacy approaches. Pursuing private dialogue and engagement or an expert informant role generally, will be of lower risk than conducting a media campaign, or trying to confront high-level officials on a controversial issue. If you are brokering competing interests, be sure you are qualified and comfortable working as a mediator. As you consider an approach and role, consider not only your chances of succeeding, but also the risks of any unintended consequences.

Finally, a good way to manage risks is to maintain strong **communication** within your own advocacy team. Sometimes advocacy messages designed for one audience can be received very differently by others. Especially if you are working in a conflict environment, it is critical to closely manage your message delivery and be consistent and transparent in your dealings with everyone involved to avoid appearances of bias.

**Being prepared for trouble** - Even well planned advocacy rarely goes as intended, since it depends on so many factors beyond your control. There are several strategies you can use to be prepared for any problems you may encounter, for example:

- Stay in touch with political trends.
- Anticipate things that can go wrong.
- Be prepared for press (even if you aren't using the media as an advocacy strategy).
- Treat your opponents with respect.
- Decide in advance what risks are unacceptable.
- Always be prepared to stop.

Remember scenario planning – deciding 'what happens if...' – is a useful way for CSOs, VOPEs and stakeholders to prepare for different situations and finding ways of responding.