

Voice, influence, action: funding advocacy for impact

Our Centre for Social Impact (CSI) insights papers share key findings from our work with clients and partners.

This insight paper on funding advocacy is drawn from a report¹ commissioned from CSI in 2019 by the [J R McKenzie Trust](#) (JRMT). JRMT has a long history of funding advocacy, with increasing investment and focus in recent years, for example through its [Peter McKenzie Project](#).

The quest to effect change in the world is the touchstone of philanthropy. Advocacy can be a highly effective tool to effect change, so funding advocacy should be considered by a philanthropic funder where it is aligned with their vision, goals and values.

This paper provides an overview of what advocacy involves, why funders might support advocacy, options for doing so and some insights and pointers to consider.

¹ See JRM weblink to access this J R McKenzie report, called Voice, influence, action: funding advocacy for impact. It includes the J R McKenzie Trust's experience and related case studies of funding advocacy. [Click here to view report.](#)

What is advocacy?

Advocacy involves making a case for change, to those who can do something about it. Effective advocacy is informed by community voices and those most affected, a deep understanding of context and expert and trusted advice. Intuition or ‘gut feel’ are also likely to influence a funder or decisionmaker.

Funding advocacy empowers individuals, groups and communities to drive change. Key advocacy activities include preparing and presenting the case for change, building alliances, and growing awareness. Advocacy can focus on solving a specific problem or addressing a single or complex issue. It can act as a vehicle for systems change. Systems change advocacy is typically an ongoing, large scale, multi-layered process that seeks to address the root causes of issues by influencing interconnected factors such as policies, practices, resource flows, relationships and connections, power dynamics and mental models².

“We support the people with the most expertise to get closer to power and influence. Usually the people making the decisions look nothing like the people affected by those decisions”

Tow Foundation

Why support advocacy?

There are many reasons why a funder might invest in advocacy.

Advocacy can:

- > get to root causes, systemic and structural issues
- > support a fairer, healthier democracy by speaking truth to power, raising marginalised voices and preventing groups exerting power over others, excluding others or being privileged over others
- > achieve greater impact, potentially for whole populations.

Funding advocacy can appeal to funders where there is:

- > a compelling issue aligned with their vision
- > something that can be won or changed
- > something to put on the public agenda
- > a desire to take a moral or ethical stand on an issue
- > a desire to support people with lived experience of an issue to lead.

“At what point does philanthropy stop taking the babies out of the river and walk upstream and see why they are falling in?”

Bharat Mehta, Trust for London

“Advocacy may not be the only strategy to crack a tough nut, but if you are not looking at an advocacy campaign then you are not really interested in addressing the problem”

John Spierings, Reichstein Foundation.

“[Funding advocacy] does require a leap of faith. You may experience a fair amount of failure, but we think it is a bigger risk to continue to invest in things that have already been proven to fail. Governments are pouring billions of dollars into policies and practices, such as mass incarceration, that we know don’t work. Our board does not think it is high risk to invest in alternative strategies. In order to catalyse systemic change for whole populations, you need to support advocates to be the influencers”

Tow Foundation

² Kania, John, Mark Kramer and Peter Senge. (2018). The Water of Systems Change. Available at <https://www.fsg.org/blog/new-article-water-systems-change/>

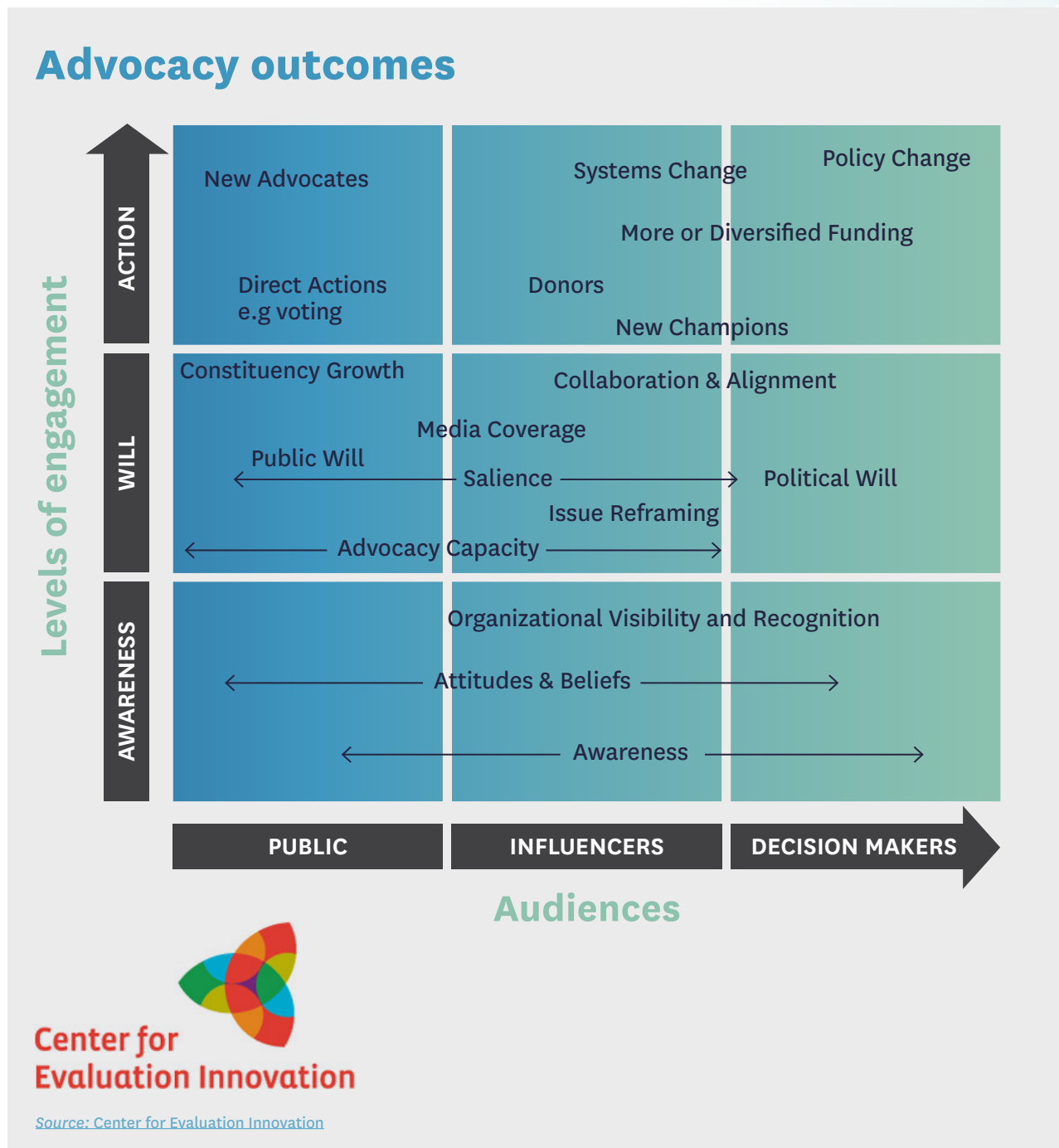
³ See <https://www.towfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Tow-Brochure-The-Power-of-Advocacy.pdf> to access The Power of Advocacy, a Tow Foundation publication (USA).

³ See also <https://www.reichstein.org.au/social-change-philanthropy/the-power-of-advocacy> to access The Power of Advocacy, a publication by the Reichstein Foundation (Australia).

⁴ For example in New Zealand, Section 59 relating to parental control, or marriage equality legislation.

Outcomes from funding advocacy can include increased awareness, shifting norms, strengthened capacity of individuals, organisations and communities, improved policies, improved systems, and positive community and environmental impact (Kelly 2018).

This diagram presents a range of advocacy outcomes, linked to audience and level of engagement (Kelly 2018).



Options for supporting advocacy

Support for advocacy can move beyond funding to utilize the full range of resources and powers of philanthropy. This means that any philanthropic organisation can support advocacy in ways that match their goals, risk appetites and preferences around engaging with policy and the political process.

Options for supporting advocacy include:

Type of support	Description
Direct funding	Through structured or responsive funding mechanisms
Convening	Bringing diverse groups together to surface ideas and identify solutions
Voice, participation and community organising	Supporting diversity of participation and enabling those at the grass roots to raise their voices and lead change
Building advocacy skills, knowledge and leadership	Skill development for advocates in areas such as campaigning, media, communicating and strategising
Coaching and mentoring	Resourcing mentors and advisors for change makers
Advisory groups	Convening or resourcing an advisory group to guide and support advocates
Research, evidence and evaluation for change	Funding research and evaluation to provide evidence and mandate for advocacy
Networks, reputation and influence	Using funder reputation, influence and networks to strengthen advocacy efforts
Raising public awareness	Supporting a group to raise or keep an issue on the public radar
Collaboration and partnering	The spectrum here includes co-funding, brokering collaboration, to a funder being a partner involved in decision making
Skills exchange	Includes seconding, staff exchanges and sharing skills amongst those working on an issue
Policy development	Supporting groups to develop credible policy alternatives
Lobbying	Supporting direct engagement with policy makers and elected representatives, to influence the outcome of policy debates
Litigation	Funding or using legal action as a tool for change
Direct advocacy	Funders making submissions and proactively seeking to influence decision makers

Cautions and pointers

Funding advocacy comes with cautions and pointers. The cautions include the need to pay close attention to issues of power, morality, ethics and who stands to gain or lose from advocacy. Being ethically-driven means focusing on the ethics and evidence around the issue, and asking, ‘What is the right thing for our organisation to do, in terms of our stated vision and goals?’

Understanding what attracts other supporters into an advocacy campaign is also important.

“The funder needs to have a level of commitment to that issue, it has to be compelling. It’s more being an ally than a grantmaker”

J R McKenzie Trust

“You need to ask a lot of questions and listen very deeply. Be willing to trust the people who are closest with the problem to come up with the solutions”

Kate Frykberg, Te Muka Rau Trust

“You can be up against lots of people who think quite differently, other money can appear, which is less transparent and has deeper pockets”
(Kate Frykberg, Te Muka Rau Trust).

While advocacy goals are usually clear, advocacy funding is often a contribution to what can be a long, unpredictable journey and proving cause and effect from funding advocacy can be tricky. Funders need to acknowledge that there are rarely easy fixes or wins, that advocacy is complex, that flexibility to adapt to changing contexts is needed and be prepared for failure.

Pointers to funding advocacy effectively include:

- > ensure strong alignment with funder vision
- > be informed by community voice and lived experience
- > build high-trust relationships with savvy and skilled advocates
- > wrap support around advocates, including evaluation support
- > fund learning, training, growth, leadership and connecting opportunities for advocates
- > remain politically neutral, but build relationships with civil servants and decision makers
- > co-fund, collaborate and build coalitions (this also shares costs and risks)
- > ensure user-friendly funding processes
- > take trustees or board members with you and shift awareness and power dynamics by diversifying your organisation
- > cultivate a relational approach, involving respect, humility, honesty and transparency.

“Policy change is unpredictable. You can get everything lined up and nothing happens and other times ‘wham!’, or one piece of work you supported takes off”

(Bharat Mehta, Trust for London).

Funding advocacy leads philanthropy into the broader realms of influencing public policy, social systems, social norms, and hearts and minds.

Being intentional about the change in the world you want to support, and funding advocacy for groups who are aligned with that change, can be a game changer for funders. When considering whether to fund advocacy, ask: “Is it the right thing to do in terms of our strategy?” If it is, then give it a go.