Policy Advocacy of Nonprofit Human Service Organizations: Lessons from Israel

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Goals and Objectives

The goals and objectives of this lecture are to present the state of policy advocacy of nonprofit human service organizations (NPHSOs) in Israel, and discuss the lessons learned from this activity in light of our studies and research conducted by other Israeli scholars.

State of Advocacy Activity

In the lecture we will examine the scope and intensity of the policy advocacy activity, and discuss how the dependence of NPHSOs on governmental and public resources affects advocacy activity. In addition, we will examine the attitudes of executive directors regarding the importance of advocacy vs. other activities and programs, as well as the effectiveness of this activity and its potential to promote citizens’ rights and strengthen civil society. In that context, we will relate to the role of NPHSOs as initiators of advocacy activity vs. their role as providers of social services, with emphasis on the trade-off between the two and the contribution of advocacy to promoting civil rights for the benefit of their clients.

What Have we Learned from Existing Studies on Advocacy Activity in Israel?

The most important finding is that the scope and level of advocacy activity initiated by NPHSOs are considered to be low to moderate. Studies have revealed that only 4% of all third sector organizations defined their main function as “advocacy”. Among third sector organizations that provide social services, the percentage that focus on advocacy as their main function was somewhat higher and amounted to 9% of all registered nonprofit organizations (Gidron, Katz, & Bar, 2000). Another study, which examined 55 nonprofit providers of personal and social services to children and youth, revealed that 16% of the directors of those organizations indicated that their organizations’ primary activity was “promoting rights” and “advocacy”, whereas one-fourth of the directors reported that their organizations invested a
relatively high proportion of their time and energy (25%) in those activities (Schmid, Bargal, Korazim, Straus, & Hochstedt, 2001). Other studies have revealed that the involvement of third sector organizations in formulating public policy and their influence on the policy-making process was relatively limited. Notably, the involvement was reflected mainly in placing issues on the public agenda and less in actual formulation of policies (Aviram, Admon, Eisenstadt, & Kanter, 2000; Yishai, 1990). Yishai (2003) found that third sector organizations operating in the political arena had a high level of access to government ministries and senior officials.

Regarding strategies of political activity, exerting pressure on government authorities was found to be most effective in most of the organizations examined, although the extent of their influence on the process of policy-making was limited.

A study conducted by Schmid, Bar, and Nirel (2008) among 96 NPHSOs revealed several interesting findings. The organizations allocated very few resources for advocacy activity, and on the average 1.5 workers in the organizations were in charge of promoting and sustaining this activity. The scope and level of advocacy was moderate, and a significant positive relationship was found between the number of volunteers in the organization and policy advocacy: the larger the number of volunteers, the more the organizations engaged in policy advocacy. In addition, organizations that engaged in more intensive policy advocacy activity in terms of its impact on policy makers at the levels of the central government and local authorities had a greater impact on decision makers. Furthermore, the organization's budget was found to correlate positively with gaining access to decision makers: the larger the budget, the more access it had to decision makers. The organization's age did not correlate significantly with policy advocacy activity, although a strong and significant correlation was found between funding from local authorities and policy advocacy activity: the more dependent the
organizations were on funding from local authorities, the lower the scope and intensity of their policy advocacy activity. No significant relationships were found between funding from philanthropic foundations and policy advocacy programs and activities.

It was also found that in NPHSOs in Israel, the most prevalent activities vis-a-vis government agencies are tactics such as correspondence, visits, or telephone contact with government officials, whereas more radical, demanding tactics such as protest activities and grassroots lobbying are the least prevalent. However, a strong and significant correlation was found between “pressuring” policy makers and the scope and intensity of policy advocacy. In addition, the more the organizations engaged in policy advocacy activities in a wide range of areas, the greater their perceived influence in the political arena.

**Insights and Lessons Learned.**

As the findings indicate, even though very few studies have been conducted on the topic examined in this paper, the scope and intensity of policy advocacy activity in NPHSOs was found to be moderate and limited. On the whole, the organizations allocated a limited number of staff positions for advocacy, and most of those workers engaged in provision of services. Thus, the lack of appropriate resources restricted the organization's ability to initiate policy advocacy activity. The directors of the organizations expressed their views regarding these constraints, and were certain that if more resources were available they would be more involved in such activity. This argument is consistent with other studies, which have found that organizations with larger budgets allocate more resources for policy advocacy activity than do organizations with small budgets (Mosley, 2010). It should also be noted that even in organizations that employed different strategies and tactics such as lobbying in parliament, activity vis-à-vis government agencies, local authorities, and the media, initiating legislation, research, dissemination of
information, and protests, the level of the policy advocacy activity was low to moderate. Another noteworthy finding is that the strategies of lobbying in parliament and dissemination of information and knowledge correlated most strongly with political activity. Thus, it appears that pressure is a more effective strategy for promoting the organization’s goals and interests, whereas moderate and limited activity is less effective.

These findings are not unique to the Israeli arena, and are consistent with the results of research conducted in other countries, where directors of services have reported discomfort and suspicion about the organizational units that are in charge in promoting advocacy activity. According to the directors, those units "are working on issues which have nothing to do with us” (Hudson, 2002).

What are the reasons for the limited scope and intensity of advocacy in these organizations? Various explanations have been provided, which are consistent with organizational theories that analyze the relationships between NPHSOs and their funding sources (government, business, philanthropy). According to resource dependence and neo-institutional theories, NPHSOs are highly dependent on external resources and do not bite the hand that feeds them (Bass, Arons, Guinane, & Carter, 2007; Donaldson, 2008; Gormely, & Cymrot, 2006; Leech, 2006). They conform to government policies in order to ensure funding streams (which comprise 48% of their revenue, in the Israeli case), and are reluctant to engage in advocacy because it can endanger their economic and financial stability and even threaten their survival (Dimaggio & Powell, 1983; Tolbert & Zucker, 1996).

Other explanations for the limited scope of policy advocacy in these organizations relate to laws that provide nonprofit organizations with benefits and tax deductions. NPHSOs are concerned with ensuring the continued receipt of government grants, benefits, and subsidies that
they are entitled to under these laws, and are therefore reluctant to engage in advocacy activity. Furthermore, some organizations lack knowledge about their options for engaging in policy advocacy (Berry & Arons, 2002; Raffa, 2000).

The low level of policy advocacy has also been associated with the executive directors’ lack of appropriate personal and political skills. Findings indicate that these directors often do not have the professional knowledge, education, skills, and competence required to enter the political arena, because their knowhow and experience focus on service provision, which is an inherently different area (Ezell, 2001; Gronbjerg & Smith, 1999; Mosley, 2010; Schmid et al., 2008). There is also a lack of appropriate and relevant educational and training programs for executives in this unique area, as well as a lack of awareness and understanding regarding the importance of political activity. Most of the organizations reported that decisions about political and advocacy activity are not made at the highest levels of the organization (by the chairman of the board or by the executive committee), and that they seldom consult with community activists and clients. Executives have knowledge, expertise, and experience for provision of services, and they feel comfortable with this role. This is not the situation with policy advocacy, lobbying or exerting political power to negotiate or bargain with state legislators, state officials, or senior officials in local authorities. Policy advocacy activity is also associated with long and exhausting political and administrative processes. Because these processes demand intensive mental efforts and tolerance for ambiguity, which the executives have not been trained to develop, they are reluctant to engage in policy advocacy activity. In order to meet with politicians, government officials, policy makers, and other people who influence public opinion, it is necessary to work beyond regular hours and outside the premises of the organization. This also requires a considerable personal investment that not all directors are willing to make (Chaskin, Brown,
Venkatesh, & Vidal, 2001). In this case, as the findings of our study indicate, volunteers can "make the work", because they are not trapped in the institutional "iron cage”, nor are they subject to the limitations and constraints faced by the directors of the organizations. Unlike directors, they can be more assertive and persistent in negotiations with policy makers. Many volunteers also have extensive professional experience and connections with key figures in governmental agencies, which they can use to promote the organization’s political activity and espoused goals. In addition, volunteers subscribe to the values and ideology of citizen involvement in policy making, which facilitates efforts to protect citizens' rights and ensure their well-being. Hence, we argue that organizations should pay more attention to the added value of volunteers and involve them in efforts to promote political activity. Finally, in this context there is the “sad” reality that nonprofit human service organizations always have a shortage of resources and struggle to ensure a steady stream of resources. In this reality, they first and foremost are committed and obligated to provide services to their clients, and most of the money they have is allocated for this purpose. Although policy advocacy is important to them, it is not as important as provision of services. Furthermore, executives and board members lack awareness and understanding about the important role of advocacy activity in promoting and sustaining the well being of their clients as well as their position and status vs. state authorities and competing organizations.

As for dependence on external funding, our findings indicate that the more dependent organizations are on public funding (in our case the local authorities), the more they are trapped in the institutional iron cage and the more they develop behavior that conforms to the goals, service programs, and standards that the funding institutions are interested in promoting. By adopting conformist, conservative behavior aimed at meeting the expectations of policy makers,
the organizations ensure and maintain the institutional legitimacy and streaming of resources they need for their survival and ongoing activities (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003; Stone, 1996).

Our findings corroborate the results of studies which have shown that dependence on government funding neutralizes and obstructs advocacy activities in NPHSOs (Bass et al., 2007; Grogan & Gusmano, 2009; Guo & Saxton, 2010; Smith & Lipsky, 1993). These studies have revealed negative relationships between the extent of government funding and the scope of advocacy efforts in NPHSOs. In a slightly different vein, Child and Gronbjerg (2007) argued that government funding is not related to participation in advocacy activity, although they found that when organizations receive more than half of their funding from the government, they are more likely to engage in advocacy as a secondary activity than as a core agency pursuit. However, the results of other studies point in a different direction. These studies have found a positive association between dependence on government funding and the extent and scope of advocacy activity, such that government funding causes nonprofit organizations to become more active in initiating and promoting advocacy activity (Berry & Arons, 2003; Chaves, Stephens, & Galaskiewicz, 2004; Donaldson, 2007; Leech, 2006; Mosley, 2011; Silverman & Patterson, 2010;). These studies have clearly shown that increased institutionalization and dependence on government funding provide an incentive for advocacy activity, particularly in NPHSOs (Mosley, 2011). According to Mosley, organizations that are dependent on government funding may advocate for the protection of vital funding streams that can ensure funding stability. They also cultivate relationships with decision-makers, creating advocacy opportunities that would not arise otherwise. For example, Berry and Arons (2003) found that 26% of executive directors whose organizations receive funding from the government participate at high levels in policy
forums or planning groups with government officials. This not only brings directors into close contact with official decision-makers, but often also puts them in a position to influence those officials. In an analysis of partnerships between the government and NPHSOs, Salamon (1995) argued that government funding encourages advocacy activity by instilling values and norms of public service such as democratic participation in decision making, and enforcement of laws that bind nonprofit organizations. In this way, government funding helps them promote their civil and social ideology. A similar argument has been put forth by some Israeli scholars who are in favor of the idea that the government should support advocacy organizations and activities and enhance partnership between institutionalized nonprofit organizations and non-institutionalized advocacy organizations even though there is inherent conflict between them (Strier, Korazim, Feldman, & Rosinak, 2012). These scholars argue that partnerships have the potential to promote ideas, initiatives and a productive dialogue that support the espoused goals of advocacy activity. The encounter between formal and informal actors encourages new initiatives and creates new opportunities for both parties. Moreover, in a neo-liberal regime that doesn’t support the ideology of the welfare state, there is room for advocacy organizations, which assume the role of the government in protecting civil rights and enabling citizens to actively participate in the democratic process.

As can be seen from the various studies presented here, the findings point in different directions, reflecting differences in the contexts and civil and political environments in which the nonprofit human service organizations operate, as well as differences in the nature of their special relations with the government and other funding sources such as business organizations and philanthropic foundations. In Israel, our studies have revealed that government funding has a negative impact on policy advocacy, as reflected in the low intensity and scope of this activity in
NPHSOs (Schmid, 2013; Schmid et al., 2008). It was also found that self-generated revenue encourages and enhances this activity: the less the organizations depend on external resources, the more actively they engage in policy advocacy (Schmid, 2013). These findings are supported by earlier studies that have examined social movements and their responses to external funding and support (Piven & Cloward, 1977). Dependence on government funding causes social movements to moderate their responses to state institutions, and thereby reduces their effectiveness in attaining their espoused goals. However, in line with the conclusions of other studies (Yishai, 2003), our findings revealed that the most effective strategy was to exert pressure on the policy-makers in order to promote and maintain human rights. This strategy was found to be more effective than lobbying, negotiating, bargaining, and persuasion. As for tactics, it is noteworthy that less demanding activities vis-à-vis government agencies such as correspondence, visits, or telephone contact with government officials were found to be most prevalent whereas more radical tactics such as “protest activities” and grassroots lobbying were the least prevalent in Israeli NPSHOs. This finding is consistent with the results of Salamon and Geller's (2008) study on policy advocacy of NPHSOs in the US. Studies have also highlighted the preference of NPHSOs for insider tactics such as participating in the development or revision of regulations rather than outsider tactics, which are considered more important and effective in influencing policy (see also Bass et al., 2008; Donaldson, 2007; Gormley & Cymrot, 2006; Hoefer, 2001; Mosley, 2010). In line with resource dependence and neo-institutionalization theories, the greater use of insider tactics has been associated with higher rates of institutionalization and government funding (Mosley, 2011).

As for the effectiveness and impact of policy advocacy in NPHSOs, this is a complex topic for research, mainly because of the methodological difficulties involved in measuring this
activity and evaluating its ultimate impact on the political arena (Hoefer, 2005; Hoefer & Ferguson, 2007). However, such evaluation is necessary in order to enhance the effectiveness of advocacy activity, to develop advocacy skills and capacities, and to make more informed decisions about resource allocation. It also demonstrates the value of advocacy, both for external stakeholders and within the organization (Hudson, 2002). Evaluations of the effectiveness of advocacy have usually focused on input and building organizational capacities, training managers to engage in advocacy, and the strategies and tactics that organizations use in these processes (Sanfort, 2011; Starling, 2010). However, there is a lack of knowledge about the effectiveness of these strategies and tactics. Even though studies on the usage of tactics clearly point to a preference for institutional and inside tactics over radical outsider tactics, research on the effectiveness of different advocacy tactics portray a more complex picture (Onyx, Armitage, Dalton, Melville, Casey, & Banks, 2010).

Notwithstanding the importance of measuring the effectiveness of advocacy activities it is still difficult to accomplish this important task, mainly because the goals of advocacy are broadly defined and generally tend to be amorphous and ambiguous. In addition, the process of evaluating effectiveness is complex, because policy advocacy is related to the activities of other agencies and organizations as well as to the activities of individuals, interest groups, and communities. Hence, it is difficult to evaluate the differential contribution of each of these actors. For example, passing (or not passing) laws is not a direct outcome of the activity of the organization that engages in promoting or preventing legislation. This process involves the legislators themselves, interest groups, and other organizations that join the campaign to enact or defeat the law. External factors, constraints, and changes in the task environment that are not
directly related to or controlled by the organizations also affect their ability to achieve the goals of advocacy (Bergan, 2009).

In the same vein, public policy-making and efforts to influence policy-makers cannot be evaluated or measured on the basis of one group or organization, because these processes consist of several stages and streams involving different actors (Kingdon, 1995). Strategies, tactics, and modes of action are also indeterminate, and there is a lack of empirical evidence that can be used to determine the success of one given strategy and the failure of another.

Finally, an additional explanation for the lack of systematic, rational evaluation and measurement of the effectiveness of advocacy relates to the organizations’ lack of motivation and lack of interest in investing their limited resources in this kind of activity. It can be assumed that the directors of these organizations prefer to report on their activities and on the public relations associated with them. However, they are less interested in measuring their effectiveness, because it is likely that the success of those activities is limited. By limiting evaluation, organizations can maintain ambiguity and avoid criticism from the funding sources and constituencies involved in these activities. Unfortunately, Andrews and Edwards (2004) are still correct in the assertion they made a decade ago, that “the area most lacking in the contemporary scholarship is the influence of advocacy organizations on politics” (p. 500). The lack of knowledge about the outcomes of advocacy may deter these organizations from participating in such activities, as there is no certainty that the outcome is worth the effort involved. Thus, directors of NPHSOs prefer to invest in training workers to provide services, and even participate in the processes themselves (e.g., they maintain relationships with policy-makers in the legislature, as well as with politicians and senior officials at the national and local levels). As a result, they invest less in examining the outcomes of advocacy activities, which are more
difficult to measure and assess objectively. In our view, it is possible that the limited achievements of advocacy activities derive from the extensive time investment and long processes required to attain visible outcomes. Notably, these are complex processes, which include amendment of existing laws and initiation of new laws, enactment of legislation, changing policies, and changing priorities for allocating funds to assist disadvantaged populations. The complexity of these processes does not provide an incentive for evaluation of outcomes and achievements. By contrast, it can also be argued that if more research evidence were available on successful efforts to protect minority groups and disadvantaged populations, and if there were evidence of success in placing issues on the public agenda and influencing public policy-makers, then more resources might be allocated for advocacy. This, in turn, might increase the scope and intensity of policy advocacy activity.

Conclusions

The low level and intensity of advocacy activity initiated and implemented by NPHSOs in Israel as well as in many Western countries is highly relevant to ensuring and sustaining a strong and vital civil society, especially in neo-liberal regimes which tend, to some extent, to disregard citizens' rights. It seems to us that in light of the goals, organizational structure, organizational culture, and budget constraints of NPHSOs, they focus on provision of services rather than on engagement in policy advocacy. This, in turn, prevents NPHSOs from fulfilling their social and civic missions. Although some studies have addressed these concerns, there is a need to devote more scholarly attention to perceptions of nonprofit leaders as policy advocates, the importance of their relationships with the government, and how these perceptions affect their decisions and choices about engaging in policy advocacy. Executives of nonprofit human service organizations should be aware that despite the major role of these organizations in providing
social services, the problems of social distress, exclusion, marginality, poverty, widening social and economic inequality, violence, and other social issues will not be solved if they limit themselves to the role of service providers. By focusing exclusively on service provision, they cannot effect change, even if the results of their activity are visible in the short term. To achieve their espoused goals, they need to become a major actor in the arena where decisions are made. This kind of involvement requires appropriate skills, patience, tolerance for ambiguity, and perseverance, because the results of such activity are not immediately visible. The organizations have to understand that if they remove themselves from the political arena, their ability to provide services to their clients will also be impaired, and they will be the ones to lose.

To initiate social and political changes, nonprofit human service organizations need to adapt their strategies and modes of operation. In addition, their executives should be trained and equipped with advanced knowledge and capacities to accomplish the mission of advocacy for preserving and promoting human rights. Furthermore, they need to change their priorities regarding allocation of resources for policy advocacy and political activity. This can be done by broadening the range of funding sources for NPHSOs and bolstering their financial autonomy in an attempt to increase their involvement in policy and decision making for the benefit of their clients.

Finally, although our findings indicate that the dependence of NPHSOs on public funding suppresses policy advocacy, it is important to take into account other research findings, which have revealed that funding from the government and public sources can in fact provide an incentive for organizations to invest in advocacy activity. The proximity of executives in nonprofit human service organizations to senior officials at the state and local levels has the potential to create a productive dialogue through which advocacy goals can be achieved.
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