

## **Evaluating Public Information and Advocacy Campaigns**

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### **Abstract**

Increasingly non-governmental organisations and international organisations use public information and advocacy campaigns to support their goals. Existing methodologies are rarely applied to evaluate campaigns. However, meaningful evaluation of campaigns is possible by taking into account the specific nature of campaigns while meeting minimum requirements of evaluation. This paper discusses "lessons learnt" in evaluating campaigns and particular challenges faced in assessing international campaigns. Although a standard methodology is yet to emerge, this paper describes the desired outcomes that many campaigns share and the appropriate evaluation methods that have been successfully used.

Keywords: advocacy, campaigns, communications

## Introduction

Public information and advocacy campaigns are increasingly used by non-government organisations and international aid organisations to support their goals: Doctors without Borders (MSF) campaigns for access to essential medicines; Oxfam International campaigns on trade issues; World Health Organisation campaigns on tobacco control and the International Committee of the Red Cross campaigns for a ban on cluster munitions.

Public information and advocacy campaigns are similar in that they use similar communication methods to achieve their goals - but differ in the goals they want to achieve. A "public information" campaign classically seeks to change the knowledge, attitudes or behaviours of a defined target audience. An example would be a campaign to educate people about the use of clean water. An "advocacy" or "public will" campaign classically seeks to mobilise concerned audiences and organisations to push for changes in activities, policies or practices of governments and companies. An example being a campaign to pressure governments to allocate more funds to development aid <sup>1</sup>.

In this paper, both types of campaigns are used interchangeably as in evaluation they share common traits. In theory, methodologies exist for evaluating campaigns: From the scientific rigour of a true experimental design; quasi-experimental design; to simply examining trend data and being satisfied that the campaign activities were carried out and that the desired change occurred <sup>2</sup>. In reality, existing methodologies are rarely applied and little evaluation is undertaken. A number of reasons are put forward for this absence: the impracticality and complexity of methodology required (particularly for experimental design); the vagueness of campaign design making evaluation near impossible; the lack of resources and know-how for evaluation; and the absence of an evaluation culture amongst campaign organisers<sup>3</sup>.

Attempts that are made to evaluate campaigns in the area of development aid are often superficial and focus on campaign "outputs": the production and distribution of campaign material and consequent "pick-up" by the media. Although of interest, a focus on campaign "outcomes" is more significant for evaluation, as discussed further below.

## "Lessons learnt" in evaluating campaigns

Nevertheless, in working directly with organisations in evaluating campaigns and examining published campaign evaluations<sup>4</sup>, the experience of this author indicates that meaningful evaluation of campaigns is possible. Evaluation methodology needs to be adopted taking into account the specific nature of campaigns while meeting minimum requirements of evaluation (such as considering other factors that could also explain changes seen). Some of the "lessons learnt" of this author in evaluating campaigns are as follows:

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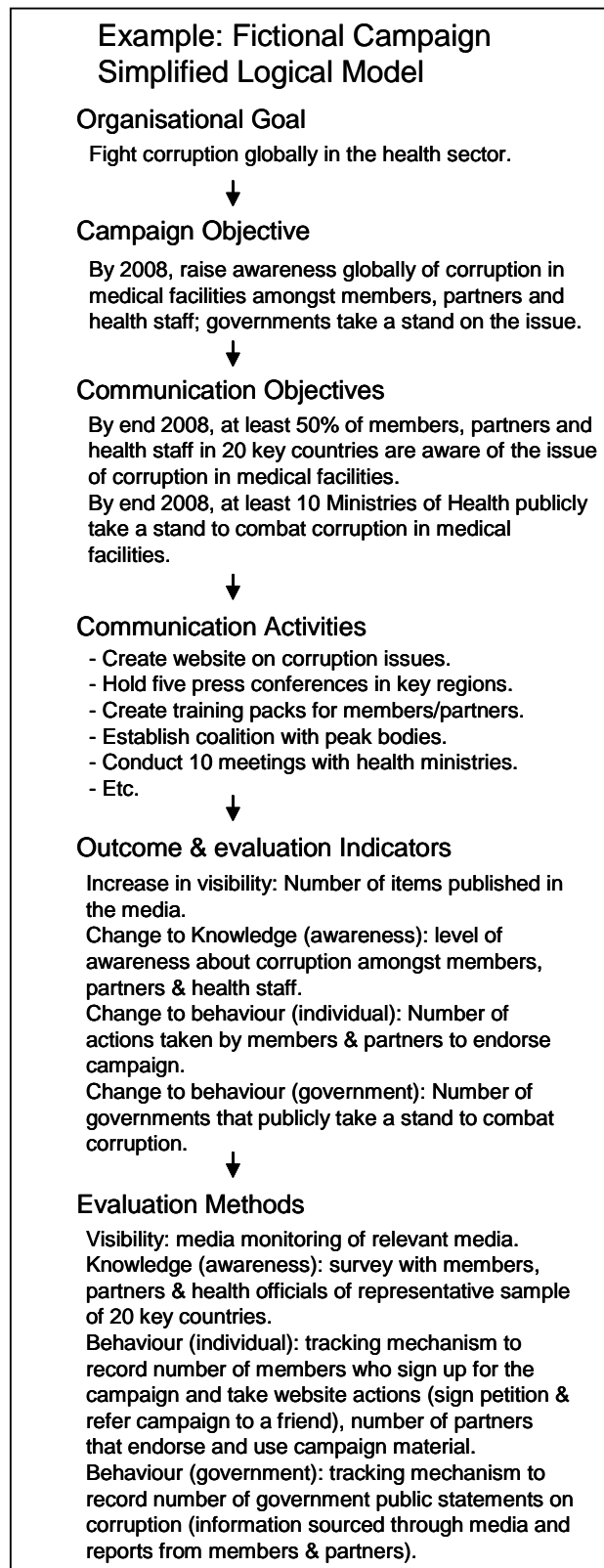
<sup>1</sup> These definitions are further expanded upon in *Guidelines for Evaluating Nonprofit Communications Efforts*, Communications Consortium Media Center (2004), p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> For further details on evaluation methodology proposed for communication campaigns and activities, refer to Dorfman, Ervice & Woodruff (2002), Lindenmann (2002), Broom, & Dozier (1990) and Watson, T. & Noble P. (2007).

<sup>3</sup> For a further discussion on the lack of evaluation in communications in general see Macnamara (2006).

<sup>4</sup> A collection of published campaign evaluation reports can be found on the Communication Initiative website: <http://www.comminit.com/en/sections/terms/36%2C11/250%2C253%2C256/q>

**Outlining the pathway from aim to action to change:** Many campaigns are weak in detailing the logical model (or “theory of change”) through which change is supposed to occur. By detailing the aims of the campaign, its actions, the desired outcomes, indicators and data to be gathered, it pushes campaign organisers at an early stage to consider key questions such as “can we really change X with action Y?”, “what are we wanting to achieve?” and “how can we measure our success?”. Intermediate variables or relays in the causal chain and external factors that could be rival explanations for any change observed are useful additions also. A simplified visual of a logical model for a fictional campaign is displayed on this page<sup>5</sup>:



<sup>5</sup> A version of this fictional example originally published in O’Neil (2007). Further examples of logical models for actual campaigns can be found in Coffman (2003).

**Building evidence of change:** For the vast majority of campaigns, undertaking evaluation in line with scientific standards that show causality is simply not possible<sup>6</sup>. But this is rarely asked of campaign evaluation. Organisations (and the donors that support them) are interested in seeing a series of evidence that together, indicate that change has occurred and what of this change can be realistically contributed to the campaign. For example, in determining the influence of a campaign in changing the practices of a given audience, this may involve interviewing audience members in addition to direct observation of their actions on the ground and then reaching some conclusions as to the influence or not of campaign elements on their actions.

**Focusing on interim targets:** many advocacy campaigns have ambitious aims that are the equivalent of long term impacts, such as “increase the percentage of GDP for development aid”. Consequently, campaigns can be harshly judged as failing if they do not meet these ambitious aims quickly. What is required is the identification of interim targets that are indicators of progress towards achieving campaign aims. In the example above, interim targets could be the supportive statements made by government officials or related policy developments.

**Focusing on outcomes:** as mentioned above, many organisations today focus on the more superficial “outputs” of their campaigns: attendance levels of events, visits to websites or number of mentions in the media. Instead of jumping to try and measure “impact” (broader and longer term change), a more realistic but still significant focus is on “outcomes” – what changes were achieved by the campaign in a shorter time frame. In public information campaigns, “outcomes” are typically changes to knowledge, attitudes and behaviour of audiences.

**Use of proxy or existing data:** Although this author advocates focusing on outcomes and interim targets, he is well aware that resource limitations often mean that it is simply not possible for campaign organisers to measure changes to knowledge, attitudes and behaviour of audiences using standard tools such as questionnaires and interviews. One solution is the use of proxy or existing data as indicators of change, such as the analysis of reports, policy/legislations schedules, records, media/web coverage. Often the absence of interim targets results in available data not being recorded and considered (such as the number of organisations that support a campaign). Examining web and media coverage can never be a replacement for measuring directly public sentiment or support but it can be a useful proxy measure that is relevant to a campaign evaluation. However, for some campaigns it may not be appropriate as campaign activities such as person-to-person communications, coalition-building and lobbying do not aim to generate media coverage rendering it an irrelevant measure.

## Evaluation outcomes and methods

Although not wanting to prescribe a definitive methodology for evaluating campaigns, many campaigns often share similar desired outcomes that can be matched to appropriate evaluation methods (and that have been used successfully in past evaluations)<sup>7</sup>:

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<sup>6</sup> For a further discussion on this issue, see Kennedy & Abbatangelo (2004), p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> These outcomes and methods are adapted from *Guidelines for Evaluating Nonprofit Communications Efforts*, Communications Consortium Media Center (2004), p. 13, Cabanera-Verzosa (2003) p. 49 and based on the experience of the author in evaluating campaigns.

<b>Outcome</b>	<b>Evaluation methods</b>
Campaign activity implementation*	<i>Event/activity tracking and statistics</i> : all aspects that indicate activities have been undertaken, such as the number of events held, advertisements placed, publications produced, press releases issued, radio interviews undertaken, etc.
Media & online visibility	<i>Media monitoring (software or manual), web metrics software, media distribution statistics, content analysis (software or manual)</i> : counting mentions in media and/or websites, visitor statistics to campaign website(s), content analysis of mentions (tone, placement, influence, etc).
Change to knowledge, attitude & behaviour	<i>Surveys, interviews, focus groups with target audiences, tracking mechanisms, web metrics software</i> : Preferably canvassing target audiences before, during and after a campaign to assess if changes desired have occurred. Tracking mechanisms (such as registering the number of phone enquiries, amount of donations, medical appointments taken, etc.) and web metrics (counting the number of people who register for a campaign, refer a campaign to a friend, send an email of support, etc.) can be useful proxy or direct measures of behaviour change.
Change to policies, activities & practices of targeted institutions	<i>Case studies, observation studies, tracking mechanisms, monitoring support and changes of targeted institutions (public and private sector)</i> : Case studies are useful in exploring and detailing correlations between campaign activities and policy developments. Observation studies by field staff/volunteers of institutions can be complementary to policy tracking (checking if policies are enacted in practice). Tracking mechanisms can monitor statements of officials, changes to policy, legislation, etc.

\* "Campaign activity implementation" is more so an "output" of a campaign but is listed here as it is often of interest to campaign organisers.

## Challenges in evaluating international campaigns

Finally, there are particular challenges faced in evaluating international campaigns. In addition to the many challenges of undertaking international evaluation in general, the following challenges have been seen in evaluating international campaigns:

- Advocacy campaigns often aim to change practices and policies of government agencies. In many countries, there is little transparency in the evolution of policies and practices so it is difficult to know if a campaign is having an impact. This is particular evident in campaigns that address issues that are considered sensitive by governments: for example, human rights application by police forces or treatment of minorities by immigration officials.
- Evaluation of outcomes of public information campaigns often requires direct canvassing of audiences through standard research methods (e.g. surveys, interviews, focus groups). In some contexts access to audiences may be difficult for reasons ranging from security to cultural issues. However, increasingly local research agencies are able to undertake such research competently. This author has worked with

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competent research generated from local agencies in countries ranging from Armenia to the Congo.

- Media monitoring remains an often used (and misused) tool to measure campaign results. Automated media monitoring services must be used with caution as they are often western-centred and search only for mentions in internet versions of print media. Consequently, important media for a campaign (e.g. such as Arabic, Russian or local media) may not be covered by such automatic tools, in addition to the absence of radio and TV monitoring by these tools.
- Campaign evaluation often seeks to identify which communication channel was the most effective in conveying a message. The use of channels (from radio to person-to-person contact) varies widely between countries and in-depth interviews are an appropriate method (among others) to probe with audiences how they learnt of campaign messages and what were the most used and convincing channels<sup>8</sup>.
- Campaign organisers have worked for many years in the absence of an evaluation culture. The level of interest and focus on evaluation varies in countries and organisations. It is therefore important that these professionals be involved in evaluation activities often and as early as possible in the campaign lifespan. Involvement can range from maintaining media monitoring on the campaign to working with external evaluators in devising the most appropriate evaluation methods.

## Conclusion

Evaluation of public information and advocacy campaigns will continue to evolve and become more common place for a number of reasons: the move towards results-based management in organisations that “oblige” campaigns to set measurable objectives<sup>9</sup>; the increasing interest of donors in evaluating all aspects of development work; the increasing professionalism of campaign organisers and simply the growth in the number of campaigns undertaken.

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<sup>8</sup> For an informative discussion on identifying the most effective communication channels of a campaign see Kennedy & Abbatangelo (2004), p. 17.

<sup>9</sup> The growth and consequent challenges of RBM in organisations is described well in Mayne (2007).

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