

Jeff Unsicher

*Confronting Power : The Practice of Policy Advocacy*  
(Sterling, VA, Kumarian Press, 20013)

Jeff Unsicher with experience both in NGOs and in teaching policy advocacy at the SIT Graduate Institute in Vermont has written a useful guide to planning, monitoring and then evaluating policy advocacy. He sets out the definition of policy advocacy early in the book and then develops the techniques and issues. “Policy advocacy is the process by which individuals, NGOs, other civil society organizations, networks, and coalitions seek to attain political, economic, cultural and environmental rights by influencing policies, policy implementation and policy-making processes of governments, corporations and other powerful institutions.”

Basically, this is what we do most of the time —lobbying on specific issues and raising political consciousness for future action. The value of the book is to help us look at steps and procedures that are nearly “second nature” and that we rarely analyse in a systematic way. This is particularly true of the evaluation of our effectiveness. It is hard to look at the past when there is a new crisis on hand!

Unsicher builds on recent guides that he uses in his course as well as presenting his own approach to visualizing the inter-relations among advocates, politics, strategy, policy and the broader context.(1)

“A policy, for our purposes, is any decision that guides the behaviour of an institution of power. Advocacy influences those institutions by influencing the policies those institutions enact. It also does so by influencing policy implications, since too often policies are enacted that guarantee rights or are in the interest of the public and marginalized groups but then are not enforced or even put into practice— at least not fully and effectively.”

I found the linear “road map” proposed by Jim Shultz in his *Democracy Owner’s Manual* the most practical, no more steps than one has fingers on one hand: Objectives— Target Audiences — Messages— Messengers—Taking Action. Although I do not care for the term “target audiences” when thinking of UN diplomats or members of Congress, “Target” has the sense of shooting one’s arrow directly. Shultz notes “With your objectives, your targets, your messages, and your messengers clear, it is time to settle on the concrete actions that will make you heard and get the powers involved to move. These range from gentle to in-your-face, from lobbying to media work to protest. Which one to pick depends on the situation, but as a rule it is best to take those actions that involve the least work and the least confrontation but still get the job done.”

The problem with the arrow and the target image is that it gives the impression of an unmoving target and a single archer. The reality, however, is that it is a moving target; some situations change rapidly, a new crisis will focus the attention of the media and the lawmakers. Plus one is never a single archer. There are a good number of people and groups shooting at the same time, and some may be shooting in the opposite direction.

Thus YeneKlasen and Miller in their *New Wave* of planning for people-centered advocacy have 10 steps in the advocacy planning moments, requiring both hands to follow. Unsicher notes “In my experience, Shultz’s road map is most useful for a relatively straightforward advocacy campaign, especially at the local or sub-national level. A group of

people who are relatively unfamiliar with advocacy can quickly grasp the sequence of steps, especially through answering the very clear questions associated with each step...*Resources*: What have we got? An effective advocacy effort takes careful stock of the advocacy resources that are already there to be built on. This includes past advocacy work that is related, alliances already in place, staff and other people's capacity, information, and political intelligence. In short, you don't start from scratch, you start from building on what you've got...*Gaps*: What do we need to develop? After taking stock of the advocacy resources you have, the next step is to identify the advocacy resources your need that aren't there yet. This means looking at alliances that need to be built and capacities such as outreach, media and research which are crucial to any effort."

In the analysis of the target, one needs to know how the system works both the formal and the informal, "hidden" distribution of power. "The advocates must be able to navigate the area of politics. They must know which institutions are relevant to their concerns. They must understand the institutions' policy-making processes. More specifically, they must understand who within each institution makes the decisions and who influences the decision-makers. In addition, they must understand the other actors who have a stake in influencing policies, either in opposition to or in support of their policy-change goals. And, at all time, the advocates must be highly aware of the type and amounts of power wielded by the policy makers, opponents and allies".

There is a short but important chapter on capacity building with an organization or advocacy collective. Improving capacity is largely the aim of the book, especially the section on research needed for effective advocacy. There is also a useful section on advocacy communications — the message — building on Lakoff's cognitive linguistics. A message needs to be clear and action-oriented — what is it we want and when!

However the message must also be related to the 'spirit of the times' and touch emotions and deeper values. Unsicher quotes Paul O'Brian, Oxfam US vice-president "Policy change happens when critical masses form to create tipping points that dissipate opposition, shift momentum, and coincide with political climate change. And so monitoring and evaluation is increasingly trying to comprehend and measure issues that are more about politics than logic — relationships, alliance cohesion, nimbleness, timing, momentum, ideological resistance, resource implications — concepts often hard for NGOs to swallow with our humanitarian ("apolitical") roots."

The book has a series of short case studies written by participants which serve as examples of the issues raised. While there are few processes which are new to "old advocacy hands", the book is useful in its systematic presentations. For most readers there will be some new process such as the formal evaluation methods which were outside my experience. The book concludes with two "lessons learned" from a 2009 Oxfam evaluation of value to all of us: "Beware of overambitious targets. This is a perennial pitfall of many campaigns. Calibrate your ambitions by vetting your campaign strategy with trusted peers. Cost our options. This will help us get better over time at having a sense of value for money. Set 'doable' and 'reach' goals.

"Pay attention to both short-term versus long-term objectives. Some strategies serve both, some don't so much. Be explicit about which investments serve short-term but not long-term goals, or serve long-term but not short-term goals. Be aware of these choices and make investments strategically."

## Notes

1) a) Jim Shultz. *The Democracy Owner's Manual: A Practical Guide to Changing the World* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002)

b) Lisa VeneKlasen with Valerie Miller. *A New Wave of Power, People and Politics: The Action Guide for Advocacy and Citizen Participation* (Warwickshire, UK: Practical Action Publishers, 2007)

c) David Cohen, Rosa de la Vega, and Gabrielle Watson. *Advocacy for Social Justice: A Global Action and Reflection Guide* (Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press, 2001)

d) Patrick Reinsborough and Doyle Canning. *Re:Imagining Change: How to Use Story-based Strategy to Win Campaigns, Build Movements and Change the World* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2010)

e) George Lakoff. *Thinking Points: Communicating Our American Values and Vision: A Progressive's Handbook* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006)

f) Jeff Goodwin and James Jasper (Eds). *Rethinking Social Movements: Structures, Meaning and Emotions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004)

Rene Wadlow

