

Assessing entry points: questions of engagement

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Although a key advocacy goal is to create opportunities for citizen's groups to be directly engaged in policy processes, engagement does not always impact on policy decisions in the end. It is easy to believe that access to policy makers will translate to influence, but in practice, this is rarely true. Policy makers sometimes construct these policy spaces to educate citizens about the choices they have made, or to appear consultative and thus, diffuse public criticism. But they may have no intention of changing their agendas. For this reason, many activists worry about being 'coopted' by policy engagement. Some NGOs who work closely with governments are criticised for losing their independence and connection with people when working with government consumes all of their energy and time. So a plan to engage should include the option to disengage if the political costs outweigh the benefits.

Deciding when and how to engage with policy processes is not straightforward or simple. Many different factors usually have to be considered and weighed against each other. Once the decision is made to engage, it must be reassessed continuously as the process unfolds.

Among the many questions to explore, here are two:

- Is the policy space 'created' or 'invited'?¹ If you come to the decision-making table as a result of political pressure generated by your efforts – a created space – you may be in a stronger position to influence policy choices. In contrast, when policy makers invite citizens' groups into the policy process, often transforming the space into a meaningful opportunity for change will involve demonstrating your power once you get there. However, often citizens' groups are not fully aware of the power dynamics, so behave like guests invited to a dinner party, not wanting to offend the 'host' with more demands.
- What are the opportunity costs of engagement? How much time and resources will the meetings, research, and other activities consume? What alternative activities could those resources be dedicated to? If

more can be gained from other advocacy activities, then perhaps the policy opportunity has lost its value and another strategy is more appropriate.

Impact is another important issue to assess when deciding if and how to engage. Again, this is not so straightforward and there are several issues to compare, such as:

- Are you making an impact on policy priorities and choices? As groups involved in UN conventions and Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers have seen, influencing a policy document does not necessarily have a real impact on policy. It may be the first step in a long process of change or it may be a waste of time.
- Can the policy opportunity be used to educate people about their rights and the political process, and to build your constituency for the long term? Although you may not have a real impact on policy, the opportunity to engage may stimulate dialogue and give your organising efforts increased focus, public visibility, and credibility. However, people may expect something concrete from the process beyond learning and organisation, and then can become disillusioned if a project or more resources do not materialise.
- Will the policy opportunity translate into real change on the ground? If the opportunity to engage leads to new programmes, new opportunities and new resources, then the risks of engaging may be counterbalanced by these gains.

While these questions provide some ways of looking at engagement, there is no formula and no substitute for strategic, critical thinking. As groups engage with power, they should be vigilant and may need to remind themselves of who they are ultimately accountable to, in order to make sure the process is worthwhile. If it is not, remember that advocacy is about creating more promising spaces for engagement where citizens are able to advance their agenda with policy makers.

¹ See K. Brock, A. Cornwall and J. Gaventa, *Power, Knowledge and Political Spaces in the Framing of Poverty Policy*, IDS, draft, September 2001, and the workshop report from *Making Change Happen: Advocacy and Citizen Participation*, December 2000, produced by IDS.

Source: Adapted from VeneKlasen, L. with Miller, V. (2002) *A New Weave of Power, People & Politics: The Action Guide for Advocacy and Citizen Participation*, World Neighbors, Oklahoma City, OK: Ch.11.