
Executive Summary

Many nonprofit organizations working in international development want to influence government policy. For most organizations, the promise of policy change represents an opportunity for wide-reaching impact that few other interventions can achieve.

One Acre Fund directly serves over 200,000 smallholder farmers in East Africa, and aims to reach 1 million farmers by 2020. By comparison, helping to change agriculture policy in just one country in East Africa could have a significant financial impact on tens of millions of farmers.

While policy change presents tremendous opportunities, it also presents significant challenges. Influencing governments is difficult, and there is often little guarantee of achieving the desired outcome. In East Africa, where One Acre Fund works, certain complexities in the policy environment can pose additional challenges. Such context-specific complexities are common in many parts of the world, and they can threaten to derail advocacy efforts. Furthermore, success in policy advocacy is notoriously difficult to measure. This makes it difficult to plan the most effective interventions, and to know which ones (if any) made any difference.

Productive engagement on policy issues requires a strategy that maximizes the probability of influence by embracing the complexity of the policy process and planning for the challenges that might arise. One Acre Fund's policy advocacy strategy in East Africa defines a series of interim outcomes we hope to achieve, which allows us to engage with policymakers in a relevant, low-key, flexible, and long-term manner.

Problem Statement

Policymaking is an opaque, semi-rational process involving complex interactions of structural, bureaucratic, and personal factors. For a nonprofit organization looking to affect change, it can be hard to know where limited resources for advocacy are best used.

One reason it can be hard to know how best to allocate advocacy resources is that it's next to impossible to measure the impact of such efforts. In One Acre Fund's context in East Africa, the complex, convoluted world of policy development makes quantifying policy change very difficult. A given policy decision could have been influenced by a thousand interrelated factors, so it is hard to gauge with any certainty the level of impact any given advocacy intervention had.

The difficulty of measuring the impact of policy advocacy makes it hard to plan an effective campaign. This is not unique to East Africa.

At One Acre Fund, we have learned to plan for a number of other common challenges to policy advocacy as well:

- 1. Advice fatigue.** In most countries in East Africa, there are many organizations – nonprofits, bilaterals, multilaterals, civil society – attempting to influence policy. Some policymakers prioritize taking the time to consult with stakeholders, while others may not. This means that access will sometimes be hierarchical, with larger, better-connected organizations getting more attention.

2. **Status quo bias.** Resistance to change can happen for a number of reasons.
 - a. *Institutional interests.* Perhaps a policy change would take away power and responsibility from the government department in charge of the policy.
 - b. *Private interests.* Every policy has winners and losers. The status quo often has strong support from its beneficiaries.
 - c. *Uncertain outcome.* Change always has an element of uncertainty. Policymakers, and particularly those with incomplete information, can be reluctant to risk changing a policy that they feel to be adequate.

3. **Unclear mandates.** Many countries in East Africa have decentralized or devolved governments. Particularly when it comes to implementation of policy, the division of responsibility among the levels of government is not always crystal clear. Even among government organizations at the national level, crosscutting issues sometimes create uncertainty about who is in charge.

4. **Internal disunity.** Factions are found in any government system, and can add to the complexity of trying to influence policy change. In East Africa, lines frequently form along government department, political party, or senior politician. In some cases, factions have been known to have an ethnic element as well.

Proposed Solutions

Broadly speaking, governments and nonprofit organizations often share the same goals. It is helpful for governments and nonprofits to view themselves as partners working toward a common objective. This principle of partnership guides One Acre Fund’s efforts— and we consistently remind governments that we view them as partners.

Policy change that produces tangible dollar impact for millions of smallholder farmers is the ultimate goal. However, given the immense complexity of policy change, and the difficulty in measuring success, it can be helpful to focus on interim outcomes. These interim outcomes are the “larger policy process” that ultimately contribute to the target outcome of policy change. We have found that working to establish the conditions that are conducive to policy change is a tangible way for One Acre Fund to maximize chances of success and to play the “long game.”

It can be useful to think of interim outcomes in four categories:

1. **Support from like-minded stakeholders.** Partnerships and other support matter, particularly for smaller players. Money is only one aspect of this – partnerships can help multiply an organization’s influence when approaching policymakers or engaging the public.
2. **Receptive audience among policymakers.** Winning policymakers over is central to this effort. Setting the stage for success means thinking about policymakers’ awareness of the problem, their attitudes toward it, their willingness to invite input, and the amount of high-level political will.

- 3. Public support.** It's very important for any advocacy effort that the public is aware of the problem, and understands what a policy change could offer. Framing the public debate through the media and other forums can help to increase this support.
- 4. Organizational effectiveness.** Successful advocacy requires adequate staff time, enough research and policy expertise to produce good recommendations with convincing supporting data, and an organizational reputation that makes people willing to listen.

When the above conditions are in place, One Acre Fund is well positioned to develop an advocacy strategy to advance or achieve one specific policy change. We have found that an effective advocacy strategy involves certain key characteristics. It should be:

- 1. Relevant.** Policy recommendations must be realistically implementable. This means considering budget implications, but also whether policymakers and the public are ready to seriously consider the change. Timing is another important part of relevance. Policy processes that are already underway are much easier to influence than areas that have already been settled.
- 2. Low key.** There are a number of reasons that quiet (but not shy) campaigns work best in East Africa. Understandably, governments often want to publicly take the lead on policy change, which means it's necessary to leave room for policymakers to be able to take credit if they choose to do so. That won't work if an organization is too widely associated with a particular policy effort. Last, it's best not to be associated with just one government partner –independence can help increase the odds of success.
- 3. Flexible.** Campaigns that are too rigid tend not to work. Policymaking is complex, so willingness to compromise can go a long way. Sometimes, combining efforts with a like-minded partner increases the likelihood of being able to influence policymakers.
- 4. Long term.** Policy advocacy efforts will be more effective with a long-term vision. Organizations should aim to establish themselves as a credible, long-term voice in their respective focus area. This will ensure that development partners, policymakers, and the public will solicit an organization's advice.

NEXT STEPS

Laying the groundwork for an advocacy campaign involves both creating the conditions that are conducive for general policy change, and developing a clear, specific strategy to advance or achieve one specific policy change.

Before getting into the specific strategy of a campaign, One Acre Fund finds it useful to employ a "policy advocacy capacity scorecard."

Using the various relevant interim outcomes in the scorecard, we can assess our strengths and weaknesses, as well as our overall policy capacity. This helps us decide which avenues for advocacy may be most fruitful and what areas we need to work on to improve our long-term effectiveness.

Once the scorecard is complete, we prioritize three areas for improvement. Repeating the process of reviewing the scorecard and settings areas for improvement every 6-12 months helps us chart our progress. Our goal is to see that we are increasing our policy advocacy capacity over time.

We pair work on improving the conditions for policy change with specific strategies for achieving policy change. An advocacy campaign brainstorm should involve establishing an objective. To do this, thorough research of the policy space is required. Once the desired policy changes are identified, organizations can pinpoint recommendations and develop a strategy.

An effective advocacy strategy should have four major elements. The objective is the first part, and this will help drive the rest of the strategy. We have found it useful to consider not only long-term objectives, but also the intermediate and short-term goals that help to build toward them.

With an objective in mind, we consider our advocacy targets. We ask ourselves: Who has the power to give us what we want? Who has the power to influence these people? When researching and mapping targets, we try to be specific as possible – the more specific, the more focused our strategy can be. We also consider opponents of our agenda, and think about the ways that they might block us.

Next, we map out our resources. We draw on the policy advocacy capacity scorecard above to evaluate our organizational strengths and weaknesses, the constituents in favor of our proposed solution, and who we can count on as allies. Once we have a good understanding of our resources, we can move to the final stage of our strategy.

In the final stage, we create a set of advocacy activities. Each one lines up with short-, intermediate-and/or long-term objectives, and makes use of the resources that we have available. We attach a timeline to each activity, as well as an estimated budget. At the end, our list of activities represents a realistic, streamlined strategy that is tailor-made for achieving the desired change.

KEY CONCLUSIONS

- Policy change presents tremendous opportunities as well as significant challenges. Productive engagement on policy issues requires a strategy that maximizes the probability of influence by embracing the complexity of the policy process and planning for the challenges that might arise.
- One Acre Fund’s policy advocacy strategy in East Africa is in service of improving the policy environment for smallholder farmers. We define a series of interim outcomes we hope to achieve, which allows us to engage with policymakers in a relevant, low-key, flexible, and long-term manner.
- Employing a “policy advocacy capacity scorecard” can help organizations assess strengths and weaknesses, as well as overall policy capacity, which in turn helps determine which avenues for advocacy may be most fruitful.