



JR McKenzie
Trust



CENTRE
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IMPACT

Voice, Influence, Action

Funding Advocacy for Impact

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The quest to effect change in the world is the touchstone of philanthropy. This quest is typically built around a stated intent and a ‘toolbox’ of methods. This paper recommends funding advocacy as a tool that could be used more, and more effectively, by philanthropic funders. Findings are also shared from a report¹ on funding advocacy commissioned by the J R McKenzie Trust, which has long funded advocacy, though more intentionally and substantially since 2010.

What is advocacy?

Advocacy involves making a case for a cause or mission, to those who can do something about it. It is often focused on policy or legislative change but has many purposes, from seeking to solve a specific problem or address a single issue, to being a vehicle for systemic change. Advocacy generally involves preparing and presenting a case for change, building alliances, growing awareness, raising voices and empowering people to drive change, including those most affected by an issue:

*“We support the people with the most expertise to get closer to power and influence. Usually the people making the decisions look nothing like the people affected by those decisions.”
(Tow Foundation²)*

Why fund advocacy?

Many funders avoid or are wary of funding advocacy, given its perceived political nature and association with lobbying for private gain. Funding advocacy requires the courage to ‘stand up’ for something, to look deeper into what is going on, and to remove real and perceived funding barriers.

¹ See JRM weblink to access this J R McKenzie report, also called *Voice, influence, action: funding advocacy for impact*. It includes the J R McKenzie Trust’s experience and related case studies of funding advocacy.

² See <https://www.towfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Tow-Brochure-The-Power-of-Advocacy.pdf> to access *The Power of Advocacy*, a Tow Foundation publication (USA).





Reasons for funding advocacy include that it is a potent strategy for change that can:

- get to root causes, systemic and structural issues
- support a fairer, healthier democracy by speaking truth to power, raising marginalised voices and preventing groups exerting power over others, excluding others or being privileged over others
- achieve greater impact, potentially for whole populations.

*“At what point does philanthropy stop taking the babies out of the river and walk upstream and see why they are falling in?”
(Bharat Mehta, Trust for London)*

Funding advocacy can appeal to funders³ where there is:

- a compelling issue aligned with their vision
- something that can be won or changed
- something to put on the public agenda
- a desire to take a moral or ethical stand on an issue⁴
- a desire to support people with lived experience of an issue to lead.

*“Advocacy may not be the only strategy to crack a tough nut, but if you are not looking at an advocacy campaign then you are not really interested in addressing the problem.”
(John Spierings, Reichstein Foundation)*

Funding advocacy to change a system is also more appealing than pouring funding into ‘bandaiding’ a broken system:

“[Funding advocacy] does require a leap of faith. You may experience a fair amount of failure, but we think it is a bigger risk to continue to invest in things that have already been proven to fail. Governments are pouring billions of dollars into policies and practices, such as mass incarceration, that we know don’t work. Our board does not think it is high risk to invest in alternative strategies. In order to catalyse systemic change for whole populations, you need to support advocates to be the influencers.” (Tow Foundation)

³ See also <https://www.reichstein.org.au/social-change-philanthropy/the-power-of-advocacy/> to access The Power of Advocacy, a publication by the Reichstein Foundation (Australia).

⁴ For example in New Zealand, Section 59 relating to parental control, or marriage equality legislation.

Ultimately, funder mandate or social licence to fund advocacy stems from each funder’s vision, goals and values, listening to community voices and those most affected, working to understand the context, seeking expert and trusted advice, and intuition or ‘gut feel’.

Many ways to support advocacy

Funding advocacy involves backing individuals, groups and communities who are believed to be articulate, ethical, trustworthy, progressive and effective. Supporting advocacy is far wider than funding; it can utilise these diverse powers of philanthropy.

Type of support	Description
Direct funding	Through structured or responsive funding mechanisms
Convening	Bringing diverse groups together to surface ideas and identify solutions
Voice, participation and community organising	Supporting diversity of participation and enabling those at the grass roots to raise their voices and lead change
Building advocacy skills, knowledge and leadership	Skill development for advocates in areas such as campaigning, media, communicating and strategising
Coaching and mentoring	Resourcing mentors and advisors for change makers
Advisory Groups	Convening or resourcing an advisory group to guide and support advocates
Research, evidence and evaluation for change	Funding research and evaluation to provide evidence and mandate for advocacy
Networks, reputation and influence	Using funder reputation, influence and networks to strengthen advocacy efforts
Raising public awareness	Supporting a group to raise or keep an issue on the public radar
Collaboration and partnering	The spectrum here includes co-funding, brokering collaboration, to a funder being a partner involved in decision making
Skills exchange	Includes seconding, staff exchanges and sharing skills amongst those working on an issue
Policy development	Supporting groups to develop credible policy alternatives
Lobbying	Supporting direct engagement with policy makers and elected representatives, to influence the outcome of policy debates
Litigation	Funding or using legal action as a tool for change
Direct advocacy	Funders making submissions and proactively seeking to influence decision makers

Thus any philanthropic organisation can support advocacy in ways that match their goals, risk appetites and preferences around engaging with policy and the political process.



Cautions and pointers

“The funder needs to have a level of commitment to that issue, it has to be compelling. It’s more being an ally than a grantmaker.” (J R McKenzie Trust)

“You need to ask a lot of questions and listen very deeply. Be willing to trust the people who are closest with the problem to come up with the solutions.” (Kate Frykberg, Te Muka Rau Trust)

Funding advocacy comes with cautions to consider, and pointers for funding advocacy effectively. The cautions include the need to pay close attention to issues of power, morality, ethics and who stands to gain or lose from advocacy. Being ethically driven means focusing on the ethics and evidence around the issue, and asking, what is the right thing for us to do, in terms of our stated vision and goals?

Understanding other resource flows is instructive:

“You can be up against lots of people who think quite differently, other money can appear, which is less transparent and has deeper pockets.” (Kate Frykberg, Te Muka Rau Trust)

Ensuring that community voice and lived experience guides philanthropic responses is also important.

While advocacy goals are usually clear, advocacy funding is often a contribution to what can be a long, unpredictable journey. Proving cause and effect from funding advocacy can be tricky. Funders need to acknowledge that there are rarely easy fixes or wins; that advocacy is complex; that flexibility to adapt to changing contexts is needed; and be prepared for failure.

Pointers to funding advocacy effectively include:

- ensure strong alignment with funder vision
- build high trust relationships with savvy and skilled advocates
- wrap support around advocates, including evaluation support
- fund learning, training, growth, leadership and connecting opportunities for advocates
- remain politically neutral, but build relationships with civil servants and decision makers
- co-fund, collaborate and build coalitions (this also shares costs and risks)
- ensure user-friendly funding processes
- take Trustees or Board members with you and shift awareness and power dynamics by diversifying your organisation
- cultivate a relational approach, involving respect, humility, honesty and transparency.

“Policy change is unpredictable. You can get everything lined up and nothing happens and other times ‘wham!’, or one piece of work you supported takes off.” (Bharat Mehta, Trust for London)

Funding advocacy leads philanthropy into the broader impact realms of influencing public policy, social systems, social norms, and hearts and minds.

Being intentional about the change in the world you want to support, and funding advocacy for groups who are aligned with that change, can be a game changer for funders. When considering whether to fund advocacy, ask: “Is it the right thing to do in terms of our strategy?” If it is, then give it a go.

A longer version of this report is available at jrmckenzie.org.nz/reports/voice-influence-action



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“Do not follow where the path may lead,
go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.”
–*Ralph Waldo Emerson*

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