

Strategies to establish Social Policy
Units (SPUs) within community-based
organisations

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Strategies to establish Social Policy Units (SPUs) within community-based organisations

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Abstract

Community organisations hold huge knowledge about the needs as well as the dynamics of different communities. However, they often struggle to provide input and contribute this knowledge into the policy decision-making process. This study was a collaborative effort to bring community organisations together to brainstorm about strategies to establish Social Policy Units (SPUs) within local community organisations. Findings suggested that the SPU would be a great way to enhance their policy capability, making policies more relevant and equitable for different communities. However, the main challenge remained funding and this required greater collaboration among community organisations as well as change in the way funding was allocated to community organisations.

Introduction

Given the increasing diversity of the population in Aotearoa New Zealand, community-based organisations play a pivotal role in shaping policies and strategies that contribute to equity and equality for communities and groups across New Zealand. In addition, strategies that incorporate local inputs often have a higher level of community uptake (Casswell, 2001). However, community organisations are not regularly consulted during the process of making policies and strategies. On the other hand, community organisations

who are currently 'surviving' in a context of ever-diminishing resources are struggling to raise their voices and to have those voices heard. This paper presents some strategies for Community Waitakere to establish a Social Policy Unit (SPU) which will serve as a voice for local people. This will also help enhance their capacity in affecting policy changes. These strategies are a result of focus-group discussions and several interviews with social practitioners and managers of non-profit organisations in Aotearoa New Zealand. These strategies can also be helpful for other community organisations who would like to do similar things.

Community Waitakere originated from the West Auckland District Council of Social Services (WADCOS), and is a community organisation supporting the West Auckland community since 1983. Its mission is to empower local residents and strengthen community organisations. Specifically, it strives to:

- connect community organisations and build their capability
- strengthen and grow a sense of identity in [their] communities
- enable meaningful participation
- activate ideas and aspirations
- help communities take action for themselves

(Community Waitakere, 2016)

Policy advocacy among community organisations worldwide

Policy advocacy is often considered one of the essential activities among non-profit and community organisations worldwide (Jenkins, 1987; Rees, 1999). However, the extent to which they do advocacy differs among organisations and depends on the political environment in the country within which they operate. For example, Salamon and Geller (2008) surveyed 872 non-profit organisations in the United States and found that almost three quarters of the surveyed organisations carried out some kind of advocacy activities in the past year. However, few resources were allocated to doing advocacy. Eighty-five percent of the surveyed organisations reported spending less than 2% of their budget on advocacy activities. Most of these organisations frequently chose activities that demanded few resources, such as signing letters to policy makers to support or oppose a proposed legislation.

In Australia, Onyx et al. (2010) interviewed 24 organisations in the community services and environmental fields to explore their advocacy activities and tactics. The study found that 98% of interviewed organisations employed some kind of institutional advocacy actions such as participating in government-sponsored consultation, preparing submissions, or contacting appointed officials; 69% conducted some kind of background research; 67% attended and co-organised conferences and workshops, and supported other advocacy projects. Only about one third of the organisations organised protest rallies or direct action, or prepared and printed materials for or against a particular issue. A few organisations (13%) encouraged people to vote for or

against a political party/candidate/particular issue in an election.

In New Zealand, Elliott and Haigh (2012) did a similar study to that of Onyx et al. (2010), with 11 non-profit organisations, and found that all organisations carried out institutional advocacy such as preparing submissions, communicating with appointed officials and participating in sponsored consultation. Only a few organisations participated in radical actions such as organising or promoting a demonstration/rally (22%), or encouraged people to vote for or against a particular political party in an election (11%). The popular methods to express opinions were through media interviews, or in print media as letters to the editor or opinion pieces.

Factors that influence an organisation's political activities

The decision on whether to do advocacy, and which strategies to employ, depends on a lot of factors. For instance, organisational size and age were found to be positively correlated with involvement in advocacy (Salamon & Geller, 2008; Schmid, Bar, & Nirel, 2008). Schmid et al. (2008) conducted a survey with a random sample of 96 non-profit organisations in Israel and found a positive correlation between the number of volunteers an organisation has and its political influence. The larger the number of volunteers, the more political influence.

Another controversial factor that influences an organisation's participation in advocacy is funding from local authorities. Schmid et al.'s 2008 survey of Israeli organisations found that funding from local authorities had a negative correlation with the organisation's level of advocacy. However, Salamon and Geller's 2008 survey of organisations in the United States revealed the opposite – that receipt of public funding is one of the factors leading to the involvement of non-profit organisations in advocacy activities. The literature seems to predominantly agree that dependency on government funding limits the scope and intensity of advocacy activities that non-profit organisations can undertake, because they don't want to upset their funders (D'Aunno, Sutton, & Price, 1991; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Tolbert & Zucker, 1996). For instance, non-profits in Australia are heavily funded by the government and they often choose non-radical advocacy activities. They try to influence policies by making friends and building relationships with government officials rather than "throwing chicken's blood at them" (Onyx et al., 2010, p. 52). Similar examples were found in New Zealand, where non-profit organisations had to take a softer advocacy approach due to the nature of their partnerships with the government through contracting or co-delivery of services (Acosta, 2012; Elliott & Haigh, 2012).

This is also congruent with the resource dependency theory and neo-institutional theory. The resource dependency theory originated by Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) explained an organisation's behaviour based on relationships with other organisations and its dependence on external resources. It hypothesised that organisations depended on other organisations and the external environment for their survival, which created intra-organisational power. This power then affected the organisational behaviour.

In terms of political action, Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) argued that because organisations had limited ability in controlling larger social systems like the government, they sought other means to reduce this uncertainty and control the interdependence. Political action was one way for the organisations to influence government policies to create a more favourable environment for themselves. In practice, as shown by the above-mentioned studies, it seems that the dependence on government resources not only influences an organisation's motivation to participate in political action but also what kind of actions they are going to take so that the 'created environment' could be beneficial for both parties.

Effective strategies in influencing policies

Scholars of non-profit advocacy often categorise advocacy tactics into two main types: insider and outsider strategies (Fyall & McGuire, 2015; Gormley & Cymrot, 2006; Onyx et al., 2010). Insider strategies refer to tactics used by non-profits in working 'inside' the system to influence policies from within. These often include building relationships and strengthening their networks with policymakers and government authorities to increase access to legislators; participating in government-sponsored consultation/advisory processes; producing submissions; direct lobbying. Outsider strategies are more aggressive and do not require direct meetings with policymakers. They often includes tactics such as demonstration/protest, grassroots mobilisation, and raising public awareness (Fyall & McGuire, 2015; Onyx et al., 2010). Insider strategies often involve only experts and professionals, whereas outsider strategies often require mobilisation of service recipients and volunteers (Donaldson, 2008).

The debate about which strategy is more effective is still very controversial, as this depends on many factors. Some studies found that a combination of both insider and outsider strategies is most effective. For instance, Schmid et al. (2008) analysed a sample of 294 organisations, and found that activities that cause pressure on decision makers, such as lobbying parliament and disseminating information, appeared to be the most effective strategies to influence policies. Fyall and McGuire (2015) interviewed 21 professionals who were or have been executive directors of advocacy organisations in the United States, and suggested that a balance between insider and outsider strategies brought the best outcomes. Employing only one of these strategies was proven to be insufficient in influencing policies. Outsider strategies are effective in raising awareness and helping people understand why a particular issue is important; however, it takes inside knowledge about the system to figure out how to change it. Once the issue is raised and has attracted attention, relationship building with policymakers and government staff is the best way to promote change from within.

Given the limitation of advocacy activities due to funding, some organisations have turned to coalitions as an alternative to enhance and maintain their influence. Coalition here could be understood as a policy network of relevant stakeholders who share common interests in influencing

a policy, a programme, or a problem (Kickert, Klijn, & Koppenjan, 1997). Bass et al. (2007) found that coalitions could result in greater political activities for involved non-profits. Fyall and McGuire (2015) interviewed professionals of organisations who participated in one or more coalitions, and also found that coalition allowed members to have a stronger voice to critique the policies of their funders without fear of losing funding. A coalition also convened resources and expertise needed for both insider and outsider strategies. As stated above, the combination of both these strategies led to the best results.

In New Zealand, joining networks and alliances, and working collectively also seemed to be popular choices for non-profit organisations (Elliott & Haigh, 2012). This is considered an effective strategy not only because of the fear of funding cuts in response to opposition but also because of limited access to government ministers. Participants in Elliott and Haigh's 2012 study also stated that government ministers preferred to meet with organisations collectively and did not often meet with individual interest groups.

Methodology

STUDY DESIGN

This study utilised a qualitative approach in which case studies, individual interviews, and a focus group were used to explore answers to the following research question: What are the best strategies to establish and sustain a Social Policy Unit for a small community organisation? In addition, it embraced the principles of a community-based participatory approach (CBPR), which is participatory, collaborative, engaging, and empowers participants throughout the process (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008). Community Waitakere initiated the topic and then collaborated with the researcher throughout the project, including developing research questions, collecting data, analysing data and providing feedback for the report.

Individual interviews were conducted with the heads of three organisations which have different models of SPU and have successfully maintained them over the years. The aim of the interviews was to understand how these organisations were able to establish their SPUs and maintain them over time. The focus group was comprised of practitioners, community law office staff and community workers, to explore the best model for Community Waitakere to establish their own SPU and how they would do it.

STUDY PROCEDURES

First, in-depth interviews were conducted with three organisations to explore how these organisations have successfully established their SPUs. The purpose was to learn from each organisation their SPU's structure and activities, how they fund and sustain their SPU and what impacts they have had so far. All questions were open-ended, and arranged by these three categories. Since funding is often the most challenging task for an organisation when establishing a new unit, separate interviews were implemented with Bishop's Action Foundation and JR McKenzie to get their opinions about the feasibility and the practicality from a funder perspective. Additional information

about the organisations was collected via their websites.

The focus group was organised in three rounds, with different activities and discussion modes, each round lasting about 45 minutes. Before the discussion, the researchers shared a summary of findings from the individual interviews conducted previously, and participants had some time to ask questions and comment on the findings. Then, participants were asked to think about the strategies that could help community organisations (in this case we focused on Community Waitakere in West Auckland) establish their SPUs. The first round focused on the potential benefits of having the SPU, the impact evaluation mechanism, and key topics or activities for the SPU in the beginning. The second round focused on the structure, organisation and staffing of the SPU, and the third round focused on the funding and strategies for sustainability. The researcher and the community organisation's manager co-facilitated the group discussion.

SAMPLE

For the multiple case studies, three organisations were purposely selected: The Salvation Army, New Zealand Council of Christian Social Services, and Economic and Social Research Aotearoa (ESRA), who have all successfully established and managed a Social Policy Unit (or similar) within their organisations.

The Salvation Army is an international charity and an "evangelical branch of the Christian church" (Salvation Army, n.d., para. 2). It has operated in New Zealand since 1883, with the mission of "caring for people, transforming lives and reforming society through God in Christ by the Holy Spirit's power" (Salvation Army, n.d., para. 4). Through its staff and volunteers, it provides a wide range of social and church-based services, including budgeting, food and clothing assistance, life-skills programmes and other consultation services (Salvation Army, n.d.).

The New Zealand Council of Christian Social Services (NZCCSS) represents six church networks (Anglican, Baptist, Catholic, Presbyterian, Methodist and Salvation Army). Collectively these include 213 provider networks located throughout New Zealand. The provider networks deliver a wide range of services including "child and family services, services for older people, food bank and emergency services, housing, budgeting, disability, addictions, community development and employment services" (NZCCSS, n.d., para. 2). The NZCSS seeks to represent the interests of its members at a national level, and to give them access to information and opportunities to network. In addition, its role is to "develop, critique and advocate for policies that will assist poor, vulnerable and disadvantaged members of society" (NZCCSS, n.d., para. 5).

Economic and Social Research Aotearoa (ESRA) is a left-leaning think tank established in 2015 in Auckland, New Zealand. Its main aims are to "carry out research, debate, advocacy and education which serves the interest of social, economic, ecological and Tiriti justice" (ESRA, n.d., para. 24). Its main activity is research, conducted by its researchers and a large number of skilled volunteers. Other activities include organising workshops, conferences and public meetings, and producing public comments.

The focus group included 11 people who are social practitioners and

community workers, working in social service agencies in Auckland. These are the people who are working and managing at the grassroots level, but are also active in advocacy and have a good understanding of Community Waitakere.

DATA ANALYSIS

Qualitative analysis methods were used to discover themes, patterns and underlying meanings. Two stages of analysis were implemented: within-case analysis and cross-case analysis. For the within-case analysis, all data of each organisation (their mission, programmes, structure, history, interview data) were compiled, to review as separate cases to understand the context of each organisation. Then, cross-case analysis (i.e., across organisations and across data from the focus group) was carried out to look for patterns and themes in the responses (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Since this is also a CBPR study, the analysis also happened throughout the data collection process. After the in-depth interviews were conducted, a preliminary analysis was carried out to make plans, as well as to feed into the focus group discussion.

Findings

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SOCIAL POLICY UNIT (SPU)

Findings from the focus group and in-depth interviews conveyed some of the key impacts and benefits of having an SPU. First, it would give the community organisations a stronger voice in law reform and policy development. The SPU would provide solid research-based evidence for their policy recommendations that is independent of political viewpoints. Interviews with managers of key organisations who already had some sort of SPU in place revealed that the SPU allowed them to explain why things happen, and then influence policies that target long-term solutions and early prevention rather than just responding to contemporary issues in a practical way. For example, one of the main programmes of the Salvation Army is to provide short-term transitional housing services for individuals and families. This is a very practical programme, aiming to meet people's basic needs. However, with the research capacity of the SPU, they were able to better understand the wider housing issues and influence housing policies more effectively, providing better consultation and gradually gaining credibility with government. They are now regularly engaged in active discussions with government on social housing and related issues.

Second, an SPU would be a place to hold local and grassroots knowledge. The community organisations hold knowledge about local context and how services work at the grassroots level, which would be a huge asset in policy recommendations. The participants believed that one of the biggest values of the community-based SPU was that it ensured the actual life experiences and voices of local people were heard.

Third, an SPU would help translate policies and inform the community. The SPU could translate complicated policies into lay terms, making them easier for the community to understand. It could also analyse the policies' impacts on the local community. Once the community was better informed,

their interest in and awareness of policies would be stronger, leading to increased political engagement. This could then create a shift in thinking, and then actions, in the community. The translation and analysis of policies might not only help individuals in the community, but also benefit local agencies, helping inform their work and services.

Activities and structure

ACTIVITIES

The focus group and interviews revealed three essential components for the SPU activities: policy advocacy, communication and research. In terms of advocacy, participants suggested that the SPU should focus on influencing local and regional policies that impact individuals and communities on a day-to-day level. The SPU should also support grassroots organisations and local agencies to make submissions and influence policies. The three case-study organisations reported making a number of submissions to various parliamentary committees every year. The key benefits of making submissions were seen as building credibility and visibility, and establishing relationships. However, the organisations advised caution about spending too much time on preparing submissions, because they were unsure of their effectiveness. Other advocacy activities include presentations, speeches and organising workshops. Connections and relationships were emphasised as key factors. Participants suggested that the most effective way to influence policies is through networks and relationships. Once an organisation has established credibility and relationships, it is much easier to effectively influence policy through formal and informal consultation processes.

In terms of communication, the main purposes were to inform and educate communities about new policies. A key activity in this area was policy translation and analysis. Since policies were often complicated and not easy to understand, the SPU could simplify these and analyse how they could affect individuals and families in the community, and the implications of national policies at a community level. The organisations that had established SPUs saw communication as a key part of what they do. They published policy reports that translated and analysed new or updated policies. These policy reports were often time responsive and had strong emphasis on the applicability and implications for practice.

Regarding research, both the focus group and the interviews suggested that an SPU might not be able to conduct big projects; however, small-scale research which focused on local perspectives would be desirable. Both the focus group and the interviews revealed that although research was expensive and time consuming, its results were essential to feed into the advocacy activities. In addition, given the current situation where local voices were often unheard, it is important for a community-based SPU to raise this local voice and perspective.

There were different opinions regarding taking on research and policy contract work. The Salvation Army believed that "it would be a distraction, result in conflict of interests, and would not generate sufficient surplus income

to be worthwhile." NZCCSS was not opposed to taking on contract work and said that contract work could bring in extra money to feed their core work. In fact, they did take some on themselves. However, their advice was to be clear about the purpose of the research and separate the contract work from their core work; and to be careful in choosing which contract work to take on so that they did not conflict their own voices.

Some current issues that the three agencies in the case study were working on included elder care, children and families, poverty and exclusion, housing, employment, the youth justice system, crime and safety, and inequality. These issues are likely to remain hot topics in the next two years. The roundtable participants suggested that Community Waitakere's proposed SPU could start with employment and housing issues, as those are the critical items for West Auckland at the moment.

STRUCTURE

The structure of the established SPUs in the case-study organisations revealed modest units which were often comprised of one to three staff. For instance, the NZCCSS has three people: one executive, one policy adviser and one administrator. The Salvation Army has three analysts; it is a big organisation with relatively extensive resources and networks, and the SPU is just one of its units. The NZCCS is much smaller and is effectively an umbrella entity supported by a substantial network of Christian social-service organisations. In both organisations, the SPU was established because the leadership team believed that it was important, and they allocated a part of their organisation's income to the SPU. ESRA is a different model, with limited resources. It has only one paid staff member, and relies on a network of volunteers to conduct research to feed into the advocacy work. They also partner with academics at different universities in New Zealand in implementing research.

The roundtable participants spent a lot of time discussing what would be the best structure for a West Auckland SPU, given the organisation's context and limited resources. The participants suggested a collaboration model would be a good fit for this purpose. It could have a steering committee and reference groups, which could be built based both on issues (topics of interest) and functionalities. The SPU should have broad aims and topics of interest to draw in a range of organisations to join the reference groups. The reference groups would be the content experts, and the steering committee would take care of the oversight and agenda setting. A reference group could also be an advocacy or communication group who could help promote a certain issue; these could be groups of volunteers or existing networks (see Figure 1).

The steering committee would be a governance group, in charge of the oversight, setting the agenda, etc. Since this is a collaboration structure, the SPU would undertake the actual work and the coordination of activities. In this case, the SPU would need two or more staff with capability in policy advocacy, research and communication skills. The steering committee would set the agenda, then the SPU would mobilise resources from the reference groups to achieve it. Which agencies or organisations to include in the reference groups would depend on the aims and objectives that the steering committee set. The items in Figure 1 are simply examples.



Figure 1. Possible structure for the collaboration model.

For instance, if the SPU would like to influence policies on a housing issue, it could work with non-profits that provide transitional or emergency shelters in West Auckland to collect information about the current state of housing and homelessness in the area, and some of the special issues that the West Auckland community is facing, and get recommendations on what would be the best solutions given the local context and demographic. The SPU would then get this information to feed into its submissions to the relevant parliamentary committee. It could also use the communication network to raise awareness about some of the unique challenges for West Auckland in terms of housing, and get more attention from the government. The SPU could also translate updated policies in housing and pass this information to the community through its communication network.

Funding

Funding and sustainability appeared to be the most challenging issue for all organisations. The unit at the Salvation Army was fortunate enough to have support from its parent organisation, which allocated about \$1 million a year for its activities. The unit therefore did not need to seek additional funding and was able to keep its independent position. The unit at NZCCSS also received its main source of funding from its own council, but it also sought additional funding by doing contract work. ESRA got its funding solely from donations, which was challenging to its sustainability.

For small community organisations, the participants in the study suggested keeping diverse sources of funding which could include donations, foundation grants, etc. Government funding could still be an option, but the SPU would need to be careful in selecting which topics to apply for, to avoid conflicts of interest or conflicting its own voice. Some potential foundations to apply to for grants include: Todd, Tindall, JR McKenzie, Foundation North, The Trusts Community Foundation, Action Station and the Health Research Council.

To set up the unit and get it started, study participants suggested calling for contributions from organisations in the reference groups (in the coalition model above). Since the nature of the coalition model is mutual benefit, in which the member organisations could benefit from the SPU by having it doing the policy advocacy they want and receiving policy advice, the member organisations could contribute a small amount of money annually to help fund the unit. For example, if the SPU could get 20 organisations to join the coalition, each organisation could contribute \$1000 per year for the first three years. This could then be used as start-up money to set up the unit, as well as to implement some of the first activities. Early successes were considered crucial to attract donations and foundation grants. If the unit could show its successes, it would be more likely to generate more support. Therefore, it is vital to be strategic in choosing the first few activities; these should be meaningful, but relatively quick and certain to achieve.

Discussion and recommendations

The participants had no doubt of the value of an SPU to Community Waitakere. It would act as a hub for small social-service agencies to raise their voices safely without fear of losing funding. It could also be a cost-saving method for small social-service agencies who do not have much budget for advocacy. As evidenced in several studies, this collaboration structure, like coalition, is an effective way for non-profits to organise their advocacy activities (Elliott & Haigh, 2012; Fyall & McGuire, 2015) The collaboration structure not only helps involved non-profits to save costs, but it also allows the SPU to achieve more while spending less. The collaboration with reference groups would also help avoid repetition of work already done by other local organisations, and would utilise experts in the community while strengthening their voices at the same time. However, the key challenge would be the coordination and collaboration to ensure fluidity and time responsiveness. One way to tackle this would be to have a clear description of roles and responsibilities for both the steering committee and the reference groups, and a mandated responsibility to complete the work on time. Attracting the relevant reference groups would also be a challenge for the SPU. To overcome this, the SPU would need to be strategic in setting up its agenda so that it could align with other agencies' interests, ensuring that the work would bring mutual benefits. It would be important to get the interested agencies together and identify shared values, so that everyone felt included.

Regarding the SPU activities, the participants suggested three key

aspects, including research, advocacy and communication and translation of policies. Research would always be a challenge given the limited budget and funding. On the other hand, doing contracted research could lead to some additional income, but the topics might represent a compromise with the contracting agencies' agendas. One way to tackle this challenge would be to collaborate with non-profits that focus on doing research in New Zealand, such as ESRA, then combine their findings with some data collected locally in West Auckland or available from organisations in the reference groups. This would save time as well as cost.

The findings of the study suggested building relationships and connection with policymakers were the most important things for effective advocacy. This is congruent with results from the study by Fyall and McGuire (2015), in which strengthening relationships with government authorities was found to be the best way to promote change from within. A combination of both insider and outsider strategies was also emphasised as the most effective way to do advocacy (Fyall & McGuire, 2015; Schmid et al., 2008). Therefore, together with building relationships with policymakers and participating in policy consultation, the SPU could raise local residents' awareness and knowledge about policies that affect them, mobilising involvement from the grassroots. Translating complicated policies into simple terms and communicating them to local residents would come in handy for this strategy. In addition, the SPU could incorporate online technology into their daily work to save costs and promote efficiency. Given the collaboration structure of this SPU, coordination would be a complicated and time-consuming task. Using technology such as online communication, creating an online network and using the Cloud to share and store materials, for example, might help.

Conclusion

The need for more grassroots-level policy advocacy activities is paramount. It does not only make policies more relevant and equitable for people but also helps people understand policies better. However, the biggest challenge remains funding. It will require greater collaboration from community organisations to make this happen. A change in government funding policy is also needed to help community organisations collaborate instead of competing for funding. Further research in evaluating the effectiveness of implemented strategies or implementation of the above recommendations would be valuable to SPUs.

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