



ADVOCACY AS A POLICYMAKING TOOL

Camelia Bulat

Director of CIPE's Regional Balkan Office, Romania

Hello, my name is Camelia Bulat. I am the Program Director of the CIPE Balkan Regional Office and today I want to talk to you about advocacy in general, and more specifically about why business associations have to advocate? Or better said, why engage in advocacy?

Speaker's professional background

I have worked with CIPE since 2000 and since then we have implemented a lot of projects that supported the initiatives of business associations or chambers of commerce, employers' associations in Romania and in the Balkan region. Also, I have worked for other projects with CIPE in Belarus, in Ukraine, in Kosovo, in Serbia, and in Moldova. So I have had the chance to meet many associations and understand their work, understand what they want to do, and have the chance to discuss with them ways to improve their activities, their projects and – very important to me – their mission and their goals.

Why engage in advocacy?

I want to refer back to advocacy, because in many cases when we talk to business associations – whether they are professional associations or women's business associations, or chambers of commerce – we face this question, this open question about why advocate, why engage in advocacy? Well, there is no simple answer to this question. But I would say that any business association or chamber of commerce should get into advocacy and should try to imprint and change the policies and the programs that are developed by their government so that they better respond to the interests of their members, of the business community or the public at large.

What can associations do for businesses?

When you join, as a company, an association, you have certain goals and certain things you want to happen for your business, for the economic environment you act in, and you know that you cannot do them by yourself. It's very difficult to change things if you are just one company or one person. It is not impossible, but it requires a lot of resources. And only the large corporations can do that by themselves.

For the small ones [companies] or the medium-sized ones, it is almost impossible to change a legislation, to change a regulation, acting by themselves. So when joining an



association, you transfer to that association what you want to accomplish in terms of legislation, in terms of regulation, be it labor code or custom duties, it is something that an association as a united voice will be able to do on behalf of their members.

So every time an association is interested in changing a policy or a program of an institution (whether that is a ministry or a government), changing or amending a law, introducing a new legislation, they do advocacy. Not every association knows how to engage in the advocacy process, because this is a process that requires knowledge and certain tools if you want to do it professionally and if you want to be listened to, if you want your message to be heard, and not only to be heard but be transformed and implemented in a new piece of legislation.

The advocacy road

So why should business associations engage in advocacy? Because many times, the best solution to a problem, the knowledge needed to formulate a solution to a problem, stays with the business community. The business community is the one affected directly by certain laws. They know exactly what barriers [to doing business] they have. So in many cases, they have the solution. The issue is how do they transform that knowledge and transfer that knowledge to the government or to the parliament so that it becomes an effective policy? And that is the advocacy road. When do you advocate? You advocate every day – when you’re trying to influence policies, when you’re trying to amend a piece of legislation, when you’re trying to change a regulation, whether at the central level or at the regional level, then this means that you are advocating.

If your members want to get a better fiscal policy, this is [the acting on their behalf to do so] advocacy. If you want to change a labor code, this again is advocacy. Many of the concerns of your [business association’s] members require advocacy.

Advocacy as a part of associations’ mission

When an association looks to put problems on the public agenda, or to raise awareness concerning a certain problem, and to raise the interest of the government, or other stakeholders, and to make things better, this means you identify a certain policy. And you consider that that policy is not right, or is not appropriate to the current stage of the development of the country, of the sector. It depends. When you develop solutions or better recommendations as to how to change that public policy, you engage in advocacy. You engage in building an advocacy campaign. So you have to follow certain steps that will increase the chances of success. I don’t want to talk in details about the advocacy process, or which are the steps to develop an advocacy campaign. All I want to tell you is that without advocacy knowledge and tools, an association, a group of interests, or a think tank is just doing half of its mission. How can you accomplish your members’ wishes if you don’t advocate for them?



Advocacy – where to start?

What is very important when you think about an association engaging in advocacy is to develop an analysis of your organization, to know who you are, who you represent, [because] you have to advocate for the interests of your members, not for the interests of your associations' managers or president. It is about the interest of the members.

You have to think about your credibility. Do you have a good image? Do people respect you? Do people believe you care about the policy that affects many, not the policy that affects only one person or one company? What is your relationship with the officials? Do they listen to you? Do you have good public speakers or do you have a president or a spokesperson that is respected and well known? That would help you. So thinking about your credibility is something that you have to do before you engage in an advocacy process.

How many resources do you have? You want to advocate to change a piece of legislation that is a barrier to many of your members, but do you have the resources to do that? And when I'm talking about resources, it's not only financial resources. It's about time. It's about commitment.

And now it comes to prioritizing. Okay, we want to advocate for changing policies, to implement a better policy, but there are so many things to change. There are so many barriers. Where do we start? How do we choose? This is an entire process and it all depends on the members' interest. But keep in mind that the members are the ones who have to choose, and the members have to understand that you cannot advocate for everything at the same time. You have to choose, and prioritize, and then focus all your resources and commitment to make those priorities happen. This requires a good knowledge of the legislative system in your country. Without knowing the exact door or the exact opportunities where you can interfere, this is a waste of time and resources.

The power of numbers

If you want to advocate as an association, you have to consider who can be your ally. In many cases, associations are not very strong and thus they need to build alliances or coalitions with peers or with other entities that support the same views. And in many cases, this is a way to increase your chances of success. If we go to the government only representing maybe 50 companies or 100 companies – okay, the minister will listen to us. But if we go to the same government or the same minister and we say that we represent a coalition of women business associations and we believe that this is what has to be done or changed and these are the reasons why we believe so - that is a different story. There is power in numbers and there is power in representativity. Government cannot ignore easily the power of numbers.



Creating a unified voice of the business community

When it comes to business community, the interest is often fragmented. And it's an entire story to be able to create a united voice for the business community. This is why CIPE has this program of creating national business agendas, which is a very effective tool for the business community to be able to make those changes happen and to be able to have that power of numbers. To be able to show that they are united, they have priorities, they come as a coalition, they come with very specific things to change and very specific solutions they bring in.

In Romania, we have done a tremendous work with the women business associations. And I'm going to tell you a little bit of this story because it's a very interesting story. The Romanian women business associations, instead of focusing on quota and on increasing the number of women that are present in government or in politics, they focus on business issues, and their concern was that we, businesswomen, want to be heard. And in many cases, we are not invited.

In order to make their voice heard, they have gathered together and have created a coalition. A coalition of women business association in Romania called CAFA.

This coalition has many people – [some people say] oh, so you are having a coalition of women business associations, you are concerned with gender, you are concerned with equal treatment. No, we are not focused on gender issues. We are focused on business issues. What we want is to be part in the process of creating better public policy.

And by advocating who they are and what they want to accomplish, they want a name. They built a brand and now, three years after they were established, they receive invitations to public debates and public hearings. They are invited to voice their opinion about very important economic or fiscal things, labor codes, and policies developed by various ministries in Romania. They have positioned themselves as a group that can provide good advice, good solutions to public policies in place, and who are independent. I mean they represent the business community. Whether they are women managers or women entrepreneurs, their concerns are with business issues.

Effective advocacy is more than talk

It is not only about saying what you want. We have witnessed in Romania and in the Balkan countries so many discussions - everybody discusses with everybody. The government meets the business community; the business community goes by the ministry. They all talk. We all talk, but in the end, from so much discussion – what is the result? What was taken from those discussions by the public officials and what was transferred into a public policy so that your life gets better and your member's interest gets supported.



In Romania, the business community was pretty much divided. The associations preferred to work independently. And each of them had a different point of view – had certain demands and certain solutions – often stating, “My solution is better than your solution.” And this fact was perceived by the authorities as a dissipation, as a fragmentation. Look, you are a business community but you can’t come up with one solution, you cannot come up with one recommendation. In fact, you don’t know what you want. So we know better what you want.

This some years ago was the kind of response received by business associations or chamber of commerce from the government. But that was years ago. Since then, the business community has understood that in order to make their voice heard, they have to stay together. They have to become united, and create a single voice. That voice would focus on certain priorities, but would not just mention what they want; it would argue with facts, with numbers and conduct research so that at the end, they convince the government that this is a very solid policy recommendation. It can positively impact in the short and long term the country, and this would also be a good thing for the government, who in many cases does not have the expertise and the knowledge that the business community has.