

FOR Advocacy Action Guide

Five Strategies to Use Research in a Policy Change Campaign



Duncan Green

April 17th, 2025

How does research for advocacy work in the case of tobacco and health? A useful new guide

I've been trawling through a '[Research for Advocacy Action Guide](#)' from the Global Health Advocacy Incubator and Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, a US group (thanks to Ken Shadlen for the heads up). With its focus on health advocacy, especially in the US, it makes for an interesting comparison with my own experience at Oxfam, which works on a wider range of issues, more of them in the Global South. Both approaches have their strengths and weaknesses.

The guide never really defines its audience, but it seems to be the more cerebral/insider end of the advocacy spectrum – researchers and policy wonks within the NGOs and campaigns. It identifies 5 roles for research in their 'policy change campaigns':

'Serve as an information resource: By establishing your organization's credibility as a timely, accurate and dependable resource, you can ensure the latest and free of conflict-of-interest evidence is included in the policy debate, and create opportunities for access and influence in the policymaking process.'

'Provide technical assistance: Research can help decision-makers and implementing agencies design policies, regulations and programs based on the best evidence, and move the policy process forward and ensure that the most effective measures are in place.'

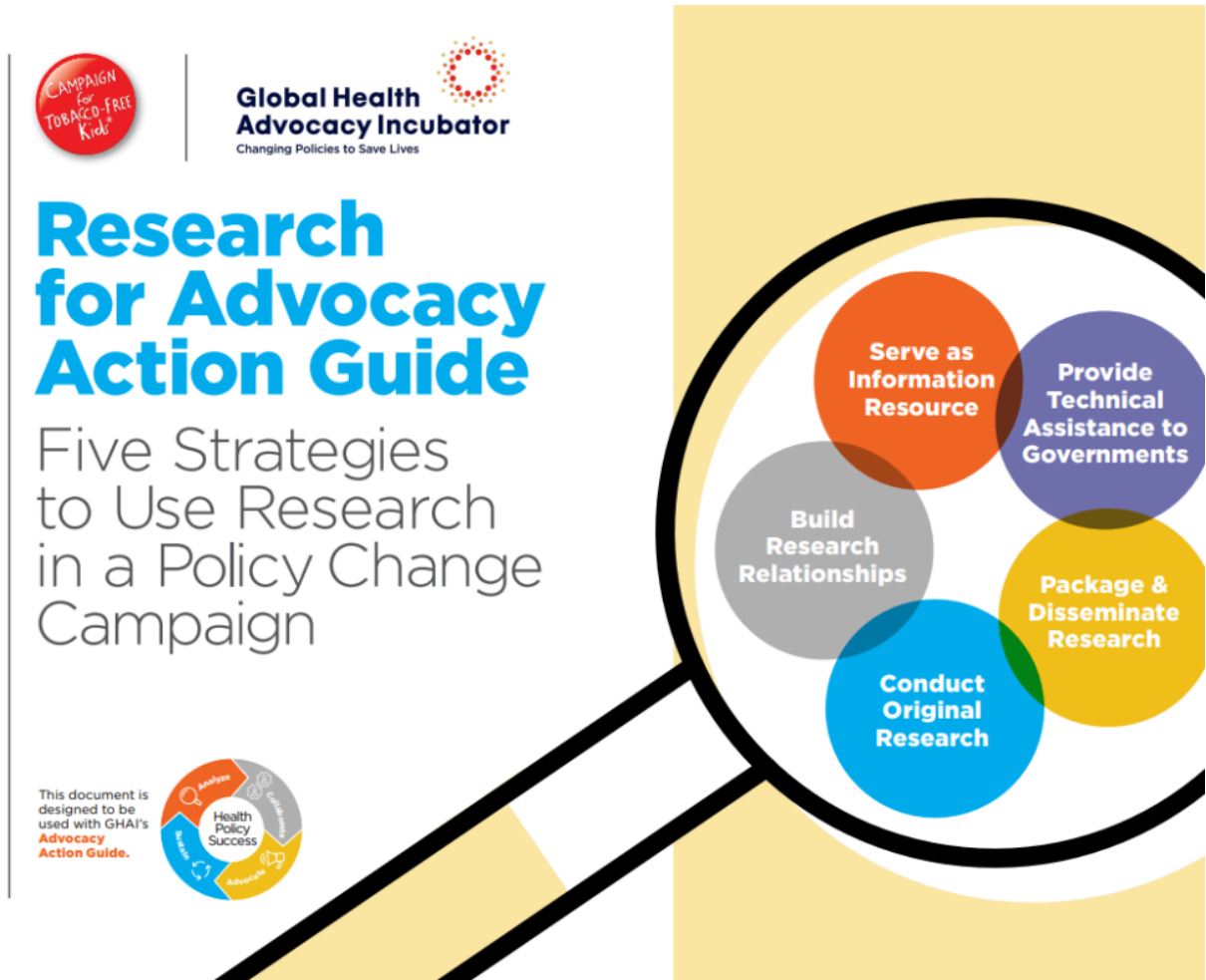
'Translate, package and disseminate research: New research can be used to build the evidence base and inform policy change. It often requires analysis to draw out the most relevant elements.'

'Conduct original research: When the research you need is not available or timely for your campaign, identify original research that further explains the problem, cause and/or solutions.'

'Build relationships with researchers: Work with academics and researchers to focus current and future research to policy needs. Researchers can also serve as experts, share new findings and identify research that can answer questions and counter opposition.'

It provides handy checklists and case studies for each of these. I particularly liked the section on how to research the implementation of policies. All too often, advocates declare victory when a policy is passed, and don't monitor what happens next. The guide suggests how researchers can usefully track compliance, enforcement and expenditure.

The 'building relationships with researchers' was also solid, with this neat case study:



'Leveraging Relationships to Share Research About Tobacco Retailer Density and Proximity: Research shows that convenience stores and other retail outlets are by far the dominant channel for tobacco product marketing in the U.S. Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids (CTFK) staff serve on the advisory board for a research project ASPIRE (Advancing Science and Practice in the Retail Environment) at three universities which study the impact of the tobacco retail environment.

The study found that tobacco retailers are everywhere, easy to access and concentrated in low-income areas. Across 30 major U.S. cities, an average of 63% of public schools are located within 1,000 feet – about two city blocks – of a tobacco retailer.

CTFK coordinated with the ASPIRE team to amplify the study by developing press releases and infographics for each of the 30 cities. CTFK developed talking points and conducted media training with one of the researchers who participated in a media tour that reached more than three million people.

This outreach was timed to use “back to school” messaging to draw special attention to the proximity of tobacco retailers near schools. These efforts brought renewed pressure to advance tobacco control policies, like prohibiting the sale of flavored tobacco products, that can address the problems highlighted by the new study.

This collaboration amplified the findings of the study and gave the researcher valuable exposure and media experience, while giving advocates a compelling media hook to advance policy priorities.’

When I read these kinds of documents, I try and understand the worldview of the authors. In this case, they are health advocates, working on ‘frontfoot’ issues like tobacco where the intellectual argument has largely been won, but Big Tobacco is doing its best to delay and water down state action to curb smoking.

That means, on our standard 2x2 stakeholder maps, that their targets are largely in the ‘high influence, high level of agreement’ quadrant, where research is primarily about providing your allies with data and arguments to support the actions they already want to take. They even assume that decision makers will turn to advocates for technical assistance, which is not something I have seen much of in international development.

But in these times of populist pushback against science, research and ‘factiness’ that feels like a shrinking world, to be honest. There’s very little here about how researchers need to understand power or the ‘point of view of the other’ (PoVO). On the Geek (evidence is all) -Machiavelli (it’s all about power and interests) spectrum, it’s firmly towards the geeky end.

That may be why it also ignores the importance of involving your influencing targets in the research itself – on advisory boards, as interviewees, or commenting on drafts. That helps build a sense of ownership and familiarity, so that when the research is done, they might speak on the panel or read the exec sum. I guess if you are as aligned as this guide suggests, maybe you don’t need to use those sorts of tactics.

Nor does it cover the splashier end of research-for-advocacy: INGO specialities like killer facts (see above) and league tables that can turn research into something that really hits home with media and policy makers.

Finally, it does not discuss the possible trade-offs for researchers of being seen as too close to any given campaign. When could it damage their reputations as objective analysts, and how can you mitigate against that?

I'd be interested to other links on research for advocacy, from other contexts – on a bit of a learning curve here!

About the author

Duncan Green

Duncan Green is a Co-Director (with Tom Kirk) of the LSE's Activism, Change and Influence programme and website. He is a Professor in Practice in the LSE's International Development department. He can be reached at d.j.green@lse.ac.uk, or on [@duncangreenlse.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/profile/duncangreenlse.bsky.social). He doesn't look at twitter any more.

Posted In: Research



© LSE 2025