Commentary

INFORMAS and advocacy for public health nutrition and obesity prevention

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This commentary discusses the potential use of the outputs from the International Network for Obesity/non-communicable diseases Research, Monitoring and Action Support (INFORMAS) (1) to support advocacy initiatives for promoting public health. INFORMAS takes as its starting point the need for more evidence and information on the nature of the food environment and on the development of stakeholders’ policies and actions that shape this environment. In this commentary, written by authors with experience of public-interest advocacy organizations, we discuss (i) the role of advocacy in the policy-making process; (ii) the use of information by civil society advocates specifically seeking to influence the policy-making process to improve public health nutrition outcomes and (iii) evaluation of advocacy activities in this area.

Role of advocacy in the policy-making process

The roles of evidence in ‘evidence-based policy-making’ are to (i) identify problems; (ii) measure their magnitude and seriousness; (iii) review alternative policy interventions; (iv) assess the likely consequences of particular policy actions and (v) evaluate the outcomes that result from the policy-making process (2). In reality, however, policies are rarely so clearly evidence based and there is limited translation of research findings into public policies such as guidelines, laws and regulations. Brownson et al. (3) identify eight reasons for this challenge: differences in decision-making processes between researchers and policy-makers, lack of relevant data, ambiguous findings, poor timing, the need to balance objectivity with advocacy messages, personal demands of the process, information overload and the mismatch of randomized thinking with non-random problems. These factors present substantial dilemmas for public-interest advocacy organizations who seek to influence the policy-making and implementation processes to achieve specific food environments and public health nutrition goals.

Asymmetries in power and the resources to use evidence

In addition, the users of evidence are not equally well positioned to make their case in the promotion of their cause, with some actors/stakeholders in stronger positions than others through, for example, their access to financial resources or their privileged access to policy-makers and government officials compared with less influential groups. Such imbalance is recognized in other contexts: e.g. an analysis of the power or influence of a stakeholder’s organization is considered in health sector reform in the World...
Bank’s Stakeholder Analysis Guidelines (4), and guidance given by the United Kingdom (UK) Overseas Development Institute provides instructions on the assessment of the interests of stakeholders and their influence or importance in helping (or hindering) a project’s successful implementation (5). Furthermore, information collected by commercial organizations concerning the functioning of the market is usually too expensive for all but the largest public interest advocacy groups to purchase or to collect for themselves, yet such information can be vital to understand the operation of food and beverage markets and private sector stakeholders’ strategies.

Relationships between power and interests

Stakeholder analyses are important in problem solving, planning and decision-making (6). Figure 1 shows an example of different stakeholders’ interests plotted against estimates of their power of influence over policies, in order to identify potential strategies for developing an effective public interest advocacy strategy. This case was informed by interviews with 169 stakeholders in 11 European Union member states regarding the marketing practices targeted at children and adolescents (7). The ‘influence’ composite score was obtained based on the perceived frequency of media mention, size of the public relations department, budget for lobbying and public relations, and perceived influence judged by other stakeholders. The ‘interest’ composite score was developed based on the interviewees’ expressed views on the need for stronger or weaker government regulatory controls, their perceptions about the link between marketing practices and children’s diet and health, their opinions on the need to protect marketplace freedoms and their perceived positions judged by other stakeholders.

The point to note here is the overall pattern seen in the scatterplot. There is an apparent dominant diagonal trend from lower left to upper right which suggests that those stakeholders with the greatest interests in protecting children and strengthening government regulatory action have lower levels of influence and power compared with those stakeholders who favour marketplace freedoms.

Public-interest advocacy that promotes public health may be used to strengthen or mobilize the interests and influence of stakeholders identified in the lower left of the graph, and perhaps to mitigate the influence of the more powerful stakeholders in the upper-right corner. To do this, civil society groups need to carefully conduct a thorough stakeholder analysis that takes account of diverse stakeholders’ interests, needs, concerns, power, priorities and perspectives, and applies this knowledge strategically to meet specific goals. Interests will frame a stakeholder’s view of a problem or intervention while power will affect a stakeholder’s ability to pursue his interests (6). Bryson et al. (6) identify four types of stakeholders including players (who have both an interest and significant power), subjects (who have interests but limited power), context setters (who have power but little direct interests depending on the issue) and the crowd (stakeholders with limited interests and power). A ‘power versus interests’ stakeholder grid can facilitate the identification of the stakeholders’ interests and power sources that must be taken into account in order to design an effective advocacy strategy. This step may also highlight coalitions or like-minded groups to encourage or discourage action in a certain direction, and the ‘buy in’ that must be pursued by showing which stakeholders have the most to gain or lose from pursuing a course of action (e.g. using a performance-based report card or media advocacy to praise, name or shame certain stakeholders to achieve a specific action) that can be evaluated.

Figure 1 Mapping the positions of diverse stakeholders for food and beverage marketing practices that target children: expressed concern for protecting children or for protecting market freedoms (below and above the 0 respectively on the y axis) mapped against perceived influence on policy-setting (x axis). (Adapted from Lobstein and Polmark Consortium (7)).
The use of information for advocacy

Knowing what and when evidence is needed

The availability of evidence, both of the problem and the potential solutions, is often very powerful in galvanizing policy action. However, it has been recognized for some time that the development of a compelling body of evidence is not always required before there is sufficient impetus to make policies (8). In some cases, evidence plays a secondary role by assisting policy-makers in their assessments of likely outcomes of policies already decided upon, and in other cases evidence may play the role of justifying decisions taken as a result of other motivations, such as political ideology, media pressure or lobbying by powerful interest groups. Equally, the nature of evidence is rarely impartial: the various stakeholders who influence the formation and development of policies may select evidence to suit their purposes and generate evidence to support their cause. Thus, evidence can be created, selected, framed and interpreted to fit the position and interests of the user.

The current use of evidence in advocacy

Given the complex role of evidence in the policy-making process, it is of interest to examine how evidence is currently being used to achieve public health nutrition or food policy environment goals. In searching for reviews of the use of evidence in advocacy non-governmental organization (NGO) activities, we found a body of work on knowledge, uncertainty and the general use of evidence in policy-making (2,9,10), and several reports of research techniques available for assessing the views and opinions of various interested parties in the setting of policies, even specifically for obesity and related issues (7,11,12). We also found some advisory documents on the use of research in advocacy in various contexts (13,14). However, we found no literature reviews that examine the uses of surveillance information, such as that being collected for INFORMAS, for advocacy purposes in the area of food and nutrition policy development, nor any evidence on how effective such methods would be in realizing advocacy goals.

In order to understand better the role of surveillance data and other forms of evidence about food environments and public health nutrition that can be used in an advocacy-oriented communications strategy across many media platforms, we undertook a ‘mini-sweep’ of websites during June 2012 and again during November 2012 to identify examples of data use for advocacy purposes. The survey was limited to currently active organizations, working globally or in one of three countries: the UK, the United States and Australia, with reports written in the English language. The search was not systematic; rather, the organizations identified were those known by the authors to be active in food and nutrition policy, and likely to be able to indicate the range of approaches being used. Organizations were selected for their known advocacy activities in respect of food supply and nutrition issues linked to preventing diet-related non-communicable diseases, from a public interest perspective. We excluded advocacy initiatives that focused on undernutrition or which did not rely on scientific evidence about food environments or food policies of the type being collected under INFORMAS.

Table 1 shows the materials found, how the primary advocacy goals were framed, the proactive policy changes being advocated and the type of evidence utilized (see also the paper by Brinsden et al. (15) in the present supplement for examples of communication strategies used when reporting survey evidence, which may also be used for advocacy purposes).

Table 1 shows a range of advocacy approaches: in some cases there was a call for a specified policy such as the adoption of a code or set of standards; in others, the goals were to demonstrate policy failure, loopholes, gaps or weaknesses; and in others, a demand for a specific change in behaviour by a specified player (e.g. food company) or demonstration of high levels of compliance in order to pre-empt further regulation. The methods used to pursue these goals can be grouped into four types:

(i) Holding companies to account, e.g. by rating and praising good practices, or naming and shaming poor practices or inaction of food and beverage industry stakeholders or business-interest NGOs and trade associations.

(ii) Surveillance of market-based activities to identify problems, challenge assumptions or provide evidence to re-frame a policy issue or rebut certain policy proposals.

(iii) Policy evaluation (corporate and government) to identify good or best practice guidelines and/or to promote a model code of behaviour or a set of voluntary or mandatory standards.

(iv) Public engagement and raising popular/media awareness about an issue.

The survey of advocacy approaches found other tactics being used which are not included in Table 1 as they did not rely on data about food environments or food policies of the type being collected under INFORMAS. For example, several organizations have developed strong statements of expert consensus based on systematic reviews of scientific literature, and others have instigated legal proceedings against a company for specific practices which may be deemed deceptive or exploitative. Lobbying strategies, such as the use of polls of a stakeholder’s views or the use of petitions calling for specific changes to policies, are also used as advocacy methods but are not included here.
### Table 1: Examples of food and nutrition advocacy reports and actions and their use of information

| Theme | Title (source) | Underpinning research information | Advocacy purpose |
|-------|----------------|----------------------------------|-----------------|
| Baby milk marketing | Breaking the rules, stretching the rules 2010 (International Baby Food Action Network) (16) | Collation of consumer reports listing violations of the code over the 3 years from end 2007 to end 2010 | Urges stronger controls and better enforcement of existing controls on marketing strategies used by baby food manufacturers |
| Corporate sponsorship | The obesity games (Sustain) (17) | Analysis of food supply and marketing at London’s Olympic Games | Call for standards to reduce supply and sponsorship by HFSS brands |
| Food marketing | Checkouts checked out (Sustain) (18) | Survey of junk food availability at checkouts in a sample of UK supermarkets | Removal of unhealthy foods marketed at checkouts and replaced by healthy or non-food products |
| Food marketing | The 21st century gingerbread house (British Heart Foundation) (19) | Identification of online advertising and marketing of products banned under TV regulations | Calls for extension of Ofcom TV regulations to include the Internet and other mediums |
| Product comparisons | Cereal facts (Yale Rudd Center) (20) | Collation of data from food labels, company websites, advertising research organizations, development of nutrient profiles and product promotion indexes | Call for healthier product formulation and stronger regulation of marketing |
| Food accessibility | CASH surveys (Consensus Action on Salt and Health) (21) | Comparison of salt content of packaged food within a category | Call for further salt reductions to be made |
| Organic food | Searching for healthy food: the food landscape in California cities and counties (California Center for Public Health Advocacy) (22) | Assessment of the Californian food environment using a RFEI to rate locations | Call for government action to support healthier food retail environments |
| Baby milk marketing | The lazy man of Europe (Soil Association) (23) | Comparison of EU member states’ financial and policy support for organic food production | Recommend UK government activity in the organic food movement |
| Food pricing | Supermarket unit prices (Which?) (24) | Identification of supermarkets’ manipulative strategies for food and beverage pricing | Call for responsible pricing behaviour |
| Baby milk marketing | Code monitoring kit (International Baby Food Action Network) (25) | Provision of guidelines and forms for monitoring the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes and subsequent World Health Assembly resolutions | Support to ‘lay’ people wanting to monitor the code and report violations |
| Evaluation of policies | Taste for change (Which?) (26) | Assessment of corporate pledges to help consumers make healthier choices, in line with UK government responsibility deal | Call for stronger government action on a wider range of health beyond the limits of the responsibility deal |
| Corporate policies | Cereal secrets: the world’s largest grain traders and global agriculture (Oxfam) (27) | Description of the nature and operation of the largest food commodity traders; potential impact on food supplies and food security | Call for stronger global governance mechanisms |
| Food trade/ investment | Exposing the charade (Obesity Policy Coalition) (28) | Analysis of current marketing standards and criteria and identification of the flaws in a sample of UK supermarkets | Call for government-led regulation and effective compliance monitoring |
| Food marketing | A junk-free childhood 2012 (International Association for the Study of Obesity) (29) | Assessment of food company pledges, standards and criteria. Demonstration of inconsistencies and loopholes in voluntary measures. | Call for stronger enforceable standards and government-led regulation |
| Food marketing | Report card on food marketing policies (Center for Science in the Public Interest) (30) | Assessment of food and entertainment companies’ policies on marketing of food and beverages to children | Call for a uniform set of marketing guidelines for companies to adhere to |
| Baby milk marketing | State of the code by country 2011 (International Baby Food Action Network) (31) | Comparison of national policy implementation using a fixed set of criteria based on scope, ambit and enforceability | Annual status report highlighting the degree of code enforcement on a country-by-country basis |
| Food trade/ investment | Better rules for a better future (Oxfam) (32) | Assessment of size and form of foreign direct investment in agriculture, and impact on local communities | Call for controls on unrestricted investments |
| Food composition | Good fats bad fats II (Heart of Mersey) (33) | Assessment of local policy implementation | Future policy actions required in relation to fats, both good and bad |
| Labelling | Misconceptions and misinformation: the problems with guideline daily amounts (National Heart Forum) (34) | Identification of problems with GDA labelling using product examples and traffic light for comparison purposes | Recommendation for traffic light labelling to be used |
| Food marketing | Recommendations for a code of marketing of food and beverages for children (Consumers International) (35) | Analysis of existing regulatory proposals for food, baby milk, tobacco | Detailed proposals for regulatory controls on food marketing to children |
| School food | School food opportunities for improvement: a policy brief (Rudd Center) (36) | Assessment of the policy-related issues, scientific findings and policy implementation concerning food provision in schools | Promotion of better food environments in schools |
| Food marketing | Gaps and weaknesses in UK regulations on marketing food and beverages to children (National Heart Forum) (37) | Analysis of the regulatory framework, loopholes and gaps | Support further extensions of regulation, need for stronger code |

EU, European Union; GDA, Guideline Daily Amounts; HFSS, high in fat, salt or sugar; RFEI, Retail Food Environment Index.
Evaluation of advocacy effectiveness

In this analysis of advocacy approaches, we found no clear evidence for the effectiveness of these approaches, or any attempts to measure such effectiveness, in the pursuit of advocacy goals. Such evaluation could provide valuable feedback to the organizations undertaking the advocacy and to their funders and supporters. Advocacy activity is a challenging area for evaluation and does not fit easily into traditional programme evaluation approaches (38). While advocacy programmes may have relatively clear overall objectives, the strategy for achieving them needs to be able to evolve, and activities may need to change quickly in response to changing political and social contexts. Indeed, the ability to respond flexibly to changing needs might itself be an indicator that could be used to assess advocacy programme quality.

Devlin-Foltz et al. (39) describe an emerging field of advocacy evaluation that attempts to demonstrate that outputs result in useful policy change outcomes. Some of the insights from advocacy evaluations suggest that strategic learning among allied groups requires building and maintaining trust; mutual learning requires developmental evaluation; there is a need to develop meaningful, manageable and measurable benchmarks; advocacy capacity as well as policy impact should be assessed; and, because of the complexity of advocacy and policy change, contribution rather than attribution should be tracked.

These approaches help circumvent the lack of clear and measurable outcomes or clear pathways linking the advocacy to a specific outcome. This is a particular problem when the policy-making relationships and interactions are not open to public documentation or observation, and there are few records available. Indeed, the number of different participants involved in policy-making and in influencing changes in social norms may make it difficult to identify who or what were the key elements in achieving these changes or to disaggregate their various contributions. The development of formalized techniques for coherent stakeholder analyses of public health nutrition issues and participatory evaluation methods, such as impact pathway analysis, may help this area of research to develop (6,40,41).

Concluding remarks

INFORMAS will develop the tools for monitoring the food environment and report on the state of that environment. However, this is not an end in itself. The purpose of collecting such information is to improve the healthfulness of food environments, and to identify the policy drivers and processes, both at a governmental and corporate level, which affect these environments in order to improve the policies for better diet and public health nutrition outcomes.

To ensure that maximum value is gained from the INFORMAS material, the collected data should be made accessible to public-interest advocacy organizations through an open access information repository. The information available in the repository should be in a form that allows such organizations to use it for activities, e.g. to identify weaknesses and gaps in policies, to identify the need for codes of practice in a legal or a statutory framework, to develop public awareness campaigns, and opportunities to build expert consensus to support policy development.

Increasingly, governance and accountability mechanisms are moving away from sovereign governments and towards the corporate sector and, to some extent, civil society bodies. The role of advocacy organizations is to identify corporate policies and practices as well as sovereign government policies, and to utilize this information in a strategy to hold different sectors to account for their actions. In particular, advocacy organizations will need to press for greater involvement as ‘meaningful stakeholders’ in assessing corporate activities and setting standards for corporate behaviour (42). The INFORMAS initiative sits within this process, providing a comprehensive dataset of global practices and making these available to encourage policy development and to initiate change where change is needed. By linking the INFORMAS activities into the wider advocacy movement, advocacy organizations can challenge corporate and government behaviour, and can strengthen their role in the promotion of better food supplies, higher standards of nutrition and reduced risk of diet-related ill health.

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Conflicts of interest

All authors declare no conflicts of interest in respect of this paper.

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