



FieldNotes

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Influencing the National Youth Agenda

Both nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and funders struggle with how to ‘scale up’ and sustain a successful program. One of the most commonly used strategies to extend a program’s impact is collaborating with government. In an era of diminished public sector resources for social programs, governments are increasingly looking to NGOs to inform policies, and in many instances, to design and deliver programs that help achieve national objectives.

How can NGOs build win-win relationships with government institutions? What are the opportunities and potential challenges involved? Described here are the experiences of three International Youth Foundation (IYF) partner organizations in Brazil, Thailand, and the United Kingdom. Each has successfully influenced government agendas at the local and/or national levels. Each is actively involved in developing life skills among youth with support from a global youth development initiative of Nokia and IYF.

Creating a Win-Win Situation: Helping Government Deliver on its Goals

The experience of the Life Routes program in the United Kingdom offers a potent example of how a charitable organization — in this case, the National Children’s Bureau (NCB) — helped the national government deliver on its life skills education agenda. Life Routes¹ was launched in 2005, not long after the U.K. had enacted legislation aimed at promoting life skills education. The “Every Child Matters” policy set forth goals for ensuring that young people had the support they needed to be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution, and pursue economic well being. Another government initiative, “Healthy Schools,” was re-launched to reward schools that promote students’ physical and emotional health. Both policies featured strong life skills components.

“With this legislation, young people were placed higher on the government agenda,” explains Sophie Wood, NCB Senior

¹ Initially established as Make a Connection in 2001.

Benefits of Public Sector Alliances

- Government has the potential for providing significant funding, allowing your organization to bring a proven program to scale and achieve greater impact.
- Public sector support enables a program to be replicated in many more places or for innovative approaches to become more mainstreamed.
- Forging an alliance with the public sector puts your NGO in a positive position to influence systems, budgeting, and public policy related to your cause.
- A program that is endorsed by the public sector can provide greater visibility and a stronger image for your organization in the general public.
- Public-NGO partnerships can raise awareness about the important role NGOs are playing in a country.

Development Officer. “Everything the government wanted to achieve is what we’re about,” she adds.

The synergy between the government’s goals and Life Routes’ goals was there from the start. The U.K. program began by developing an extensive life skills curriculum and teacher training materials. Over time, the curriculum helped to fill an urgent government need for proven resources to use in schools to meet its Personal, Social, and Health Education (PSHE) requirement. Over the past two years alone, the curriculum has reached nearly 20,000 young people. In addition, NCB has trained hundreds of teachers, government education officers, and local practitioners working with youth.

“We wouldn’t have got where we have without listening to what government wanted and helping schools work out how they could achieve it,” says Wood, underscoring that the program has benefited greatly from NCB’s position as a national umbrella organization that conducts research, promotes multi-sector collaboration, and advocates for improved policies benefiting children and youth.

In Thailand, the National Council for Child and Youth Development (NCYD) has also worked to enhance the government’s ability to deliver on existing policies. In 1999, the government passed the Thai National Education Act, which mandated that public schools equip young people with the life skills necessary to be successful and to avoid negative influences, such as drugs and alcohol, sexual exploitation, and the danger of HIV/AIDS. The Department of Mental Health was assigned as the primary agency for developing a national life skills program.

According to NCYD Executive Director Srisak Thaiarry, life skills programs and policies in the country typically focused on preventing young people from pursuing unhealthy behaviors. Conceptually, less emphasis was placed on promoting positive youth

development outcomes, such as enhancing young people’s ability to think critically, to be good leaders, and contribute to their communities. The delivery of life skills education also centered almost exclusively on training teachers and reaching students.

What NCYD offered through the Nokia-supported “Make a Connection” program in Thailand was a more holistic approach that engaged parents and community members and targeted out-of-school, as well as in-school, youth. At the heart of the program was the development of a life skills curriculum that could be adapted for use in both secondary schools and non-formal education programs.

In developing its program, NCYD capitalized on its track record and contacts within the Ministry of Education and Department of Mental Health. “Reputation was important, as was our status and personal links,” says Thaiarry. Also important was generating ownership within relevant government departments.

Engaging Diverse Stakeholders: Building Ownership from the Ground Up

IYF partners stress the importance of taking the time to develop a quality program before trying to influence or collaborate with government. Success will speak for itself. Also important is engaging key stakeholders in the process. For example, in Thailand, NCYD began its program with a pilot phase in which it targeted 600 teachers and 1,800 parents in three provinces. Through hosting festivals and forums, NCYD solicited comments from teachers, parents, local NGOs, school administrators, and municipal authorities.

“Whenever we had activities, we would ask people who were not in our program to observe what we were doing,” says Thaiarry. The process can be painstaking, but increases your likelihood for being accepted at the national level.

In the U.K.’s case, Wood also emphasizes the importance of listening to those you’re trying to reach and modifying your approach accordingly. “If you just aim for the national agenda, it doesn’t ensure success,” she emphasizes. “Unless you’re making an impact on the people that are delivering your program, it doesn’t matter what you’re doing at the national level.” Life Routes accomplishes this through its teacher and practitioner training workshops.

Taking Your Program to Scale

Some program models and approaches are easier to pitch to governments than others. In the case of Make a Connection in Thailand and Life Routes in the UK, both developed curriculums and teacher training programs that are relatively easy to adapt and scale-up at the national level. In other words, it was easier to gain support because what they sought to transfer over was tangible, needed, and easy to incorporate into existing systems.

While waiting to see if the national government was going to approve its curriculum for widespread use, NCYD has pursued other means of replicating its approach informally around the country. In one instance, it collaborated with the Christian Children’s Fund, which sought to replicate the program in 16 of the schools it supports in Northeast Thailand. NCYD worked with another donor to replicate the model in ten schools in two additional provinces.

In the aftermath of a government coup in October 2006, NCYD was still awaiting confirmation of how and when its program would be adopted at the national level, demonstrating that political instability can pose a major barrier to even the best laid plans. Nonetheless, the program continues at the local level, building on the momentum it achieved through carefully testing its approach and generating local buy-in.

Lessons Learned

IYF partners emphasize that there is no “one size fits all” approach to influencing local or national government policies and programs. Every country context is different, as are ways of influencing governments. However, partners do offer some broad recommendations based on their experiences.

- **Do your homework.** Study existing national policies and approaches to developing life skills. Familiarize yourself with the challenges and opportunities that exist, and the key players you will need to work with at the regional or national level.



Josh (left) has become more confident and clear about his goals through participating in the Life Routes program in the UK.

- **Develop a track record before trying to influence policy makers.** Government will be far more attracted to your approach if you can prove it works.
- **Start small.** Try not to get overwhelmed by developing a national approach right away. You might initially work to educate policy makers about the importance of life skills education and your particular approach. Or, you might consider forming alliances with local government offices before trying to influence national policies and programs.
- **Be positive.** Rather than prescribe a completely new approach — or point to flaws in existing approaches — look at ways of improving or building upon existing programs.
- **Be inclusive.** Engage in an open dialogue with stakeholders. “A lot of good projects NGOs are doing fail because they do it on their own,” says Thaiarry.

Focus Brazil: Working with Municipal Authorities



In Brazil, IYF’s partner, Fundação Abrinq, has successfully collaborated with local government authorities in implementing the Nokia-funded Mudando a História program. Launched in 2000, the program trains youth, ages 13 to 25, to serve as reading mentors to disadvantaged children. To date, more than 40,000 children and youth in São Paulo and Manaus, where the program is being implemented, have benefited.

In Manaus, the program has forged a close relationship with the Municipal Committee for Young People, the local government authority responsible for supporting children and youth needs. The Committee has not only provided the program with office space, but is coordinating its delivery in the region and the training of youth reading mentors.

To strengthen its program outreach in São Paulo, Abrinq participated in a month-long reading awareness campaign sponsored by the municipal government there. Roughly 200 youth trained through Mudando a História conducted reading sessions with children at public parks, libraries, and museums.

By establishing a proven track record for success at the local level — and partnering with local government authorities — Abrinq is now poised to attract national attention, which will help as it strives to institutionalize its approach in the future. To Abrinq’s benefit is its focus on early childhood education, which has emerged as a national government priority related to meeting the Millennium Development Goals. According to the nation’s current “Child Friendly President’s Plan,” government priorities include improving and expanding early-childhood and primary education, and increasing literacy training for youth. The Plan recognizes the importance of local initiatives and communities in achieving its goals — a factor that stands in Abrinq’s favor.

- **Generate positive media exposure for your efforts.**
Such visibility will attract the attention of government officials and reinforce your program's potential for wider success. Invite policy makers to special events; keep them updated on your activities.
- **Recognize that influencing national agendas takes time.**
Building the right relationships with government officials can be time-consuming, as is developing curricula and other materials that are appropriate at the national level. To protect your interests in the face of government staff changes that can occur with election cycles, strive to develop relationships with a cross-section of government officials.



We wouldn't have got where we have without listening to what government wanted and helping schools work out how they could achieve it.

*Sophie Wood, Senior Development Officer,
National Children's Bureau, UK*

Questions to Consider

In determining how to best influence national policies and/or work with government, consider:

- Whether and how your program's goals fit within existing government policies. Are there ways in which your program can help the public sector better deliver upon its agenda? And if the policy environment related to life skills is weak in your country, how might you build upon related youth development, health, or educational policies?
- How you can 'make the case' for life skills education as a valuable means of improving youth development outcomes in such areas as health, educational performance, and employment. You might also research cost-benefit data, underscoring the long-term savings associated with preventive, life skills-based approaches.
- How you might integrate both local and national components into your program strategy.
- Whether you need champions from the government or private sector to help work through the bureaucracy.
- Organizations you might collaborate with in forming a coalition around your issue. Together, you may achieve greater success in influencing government policies than working alone.
- Whether your organization is well positioned to influence government policy and whether you have taken the necessary steps to reinforce your legitimacy and credibility. Says Wood, "If your organization has respect and can open doors, it makes working with government much easier."
- Ways in which you can use your expertise and experience to make the government's job easier.
- How you plan to identify and engage relevant stakeholders (e.g., community members, parents, teachers, school administrators, students, and policy makers) so that each feels they have input in the final result, and feels a part of the process moving forward.
- The resources you need to develop (e.g., publications, handbooks, curricula) to help promote the adaptation of your approach on a larger scale.
- How you plan to measure the effectiveness of your program and communicate those results.

Additional Resources

Asset Building for Social Change: Pathways to Large Scale Impact. New York: Ford Foundation © 2004.

Coburn, Cynthia. "Re-thinking Scale: Moving Beyond Numbers to Deep and Lasting Change" in *Educational Researcher*, Vol. 32, No 6, pp. 3-12.

Focus Tool Series 3, Pathfinder International © 2004. See: <http://www.pathfind.org/pf/pubs/focus/guidesandtools/PDF/Scalingtext1.PDF>

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Field Notes is a publication series of the International Youth Foundation (IYF) aimed at capturing valuable lessons and experiences from its programs worldwide. For additional information about IYF, visit www.iyfnet.org.

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