

Lobbying effectively with national decision-makers

'Lobbying' generally refers to trying to influence policy at any level – local, national, international – by promoting your views to those who have the power to make those policy changes. However, different strategies are needed to effect such policy changes successfully.

Here, we put together a few tips and notes based on the experiences of other youth activists, that may help you in your lobbying efforts. Step forth and be brave – you won't know what you can accomplish til you try!

A) Timing is crucial.

Create and use political opportunity. While it's often good to start as early as possible, it's also useful to take advantage of 'political opportunity' – such as contacting your minister when there has been some media surrounding a particular issue, for example. (You can help generate such publicity, through things like media releases, talking to journalists interested in your issue, even organising a press conference.) Or catching a public consultation on youth issues, if there's one not too long away. Or soon after a minister has made a speech about increasing youth participation. Or after some civil society organization has released some research or recommendation supporting greater youth involvement.

Use your instinct on when might be a good time to make your move – if you're not sure, make contact as soon as possible.

B) Do your homework

What's already been done? Before you approach a Minister, it helps to find out what government efforts are already being done to include youth in decision-making around the issue you are lobbying on. Check up on consultations, forums, focus groups, etc have been conducted.

What promises have been made? Be aware of relevant commitments made in previous documents. You may want to look up your Youth, Foreign and even Education ministries (for example) for issue papers, position papers, briefing papers, and a host of other sources that may contain such commitments or recommendations that help build your case. Even speeches made by Ministers (and other important people) may support your position, especially if it is (for example) something that a Prime Minister or Youth Minister said regarding greater youth participation.

Build a bullet-proof argument. Have clear, concise arguments to support your position. When you look for this information, you certainly want to include your various national ministries, but don't limit yourself – there are plenty of institutes, agencies and NGOs that may have information to boost your argument. Even academic journals which have relevant research may lend support for your case. It helps to have a broad-scope approach to gathering your range of sources to support your argument.

You may want to compile your suggestions and arguments in a concise proposal, and if you have the resources, put it up on a website, where you can also include

extra bits that you may not have been able to on the proposal in the interest of brevity. And that's just one idea!

C) Make contact

Identify your targets. Often, it's not the ministers, but the ministerial advisors (or their subordinates!), who will be reading your proposal or emails/faxes, and also the ones making recommendations on whether the minister should pay any attention to your ideas. So find out who these people are, and address your letters/emails to them personally.

Be persistent. Sometimes it takes a while to make contact with those you want to lobby, especially when you have to navigate your way through the multiple layers of bureaucracy in the government. Keep trying using different tactics: writing letters, emails or faxes. Be persistent, but not pestering. Take risks. Approach high-level ministerial advisors and ask them for a meeting – or coffee.

Don't throw other contacts away. Some contacts may not be able to help you directly, but maintain good relations – they may know colleagues who can help you.

Put it in context. If you are sending a proposal, leave a brief written summary of your position/s in a covering letter addressed personally to the person you are trying to lobby.

Think long term. Don't lose sight of building your credibility for future encounters: a ministerial advisor who does not support your position on one issue may support you on another.

D) Build a coalition of support

Cut a big slice of the pie. Many issues, particularly youth issues, intersect with several other sectors and actors of society. Use that to your advantage. Build a network of bodies that support your position – NGOs, foundations, charities, schools, (socially responsible) businesses, special interest groups, grassroots and community organizations that cut across the different sectors of youth, education, community, even environment. A minister is much more likely to sit up and pay attention when s/he realises that a large cross-section of society is concerned with an issue.

Get tactical. There are different strategies you can use involving your 'coalition', so don't be afraid to use as many as you think necessary, and in whichever combination you feel is most effective. Some ideas: getting formal letters of support from your network of organizations (directed to various decision-makers/ministers you are targeting), organising a roundtable with the most supportive organizations, you and the minister/s, organising a public youth consultation where the supportive organisations attend or act as panellists, talking to schools and getting support letters from principals (or an association for principals/educators in your country, if there is one). There are many more – feel free to use any ideas you think can work!

FINALLY – GOOD LUCK!!