

## Campaigning and Complexity: how do we campaign on a problem when we don't know the solution?

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Had a thought-provoking discussion on 'influencing' with Exfamer (ex Oxfam Australia turned [consultant](#)) James Ensor a few days ago. The starting point was an apparent tension between the reading I've been doing on complex systems, and Oxfam's traditional model of campaigning.

In my first days at Oxfam, I was told that the recipe for a successful campaign was 'problem, villain, solution' (heroes are apparently optional). And sure enough, if you look at good/bad campaigns, the presence or absence of all three ingredients seems pretty key.

But one of the characteristics of complex systems is that solutions are seldom obvious and often only emerge from trial and error. Elsewhere I've translated the offputting language of complexity theory into '[how do you plan when you don't know what's going to happen?](#)' But in the case of advocacy and campaigns aimed at influencing government or international organizations' policies, a better formulation would be 'how do you campaign when you don't have a solution?'



The first option is of course to pretend that you do anyway. Echoes of [Yes Minister's](#) 'we must do something. This is something. Therefore we must do it!' (see pic). Not that Oxfam would ever stoop to such a thing, obviously.

Alternatively, stick to problems that are less complex, at least at first sight. Campaign to give people money, or bednets, or vaccines, or food (although any of these efforts in practice are unlikely to stay neat and linear for long).

But there are a number of other options:

**Bearing Witness:** often the best role for INGOs is to use their communications capacity to amplify the voice of people on the receiving end of bad stuff – climate change, conflict, corruption, violence against women. This fits with [Matt Andrews'](#) argument that the role of outsiders is to identify and highlight problems, but leave the search for solutions to local players.

**Keep solutions very broad brush:** 'pay tax', 'make trade fair', 'respect human rights', 'end poverty', but resist being sucked into the detail. Very difficult to do in practice – how do you respond when the targeted politician or civil servant says 'we agree, what do you think we should do?' Responding 'dunno, that's your job not mine' doesn't get you invited back.

**Default to process:** I've been dismissive of NGOs' endless obsession with process, but am starting to rethink. Civil society participation, transparency, accountability all make a lot of sense as campaign asks in complex systems.

**Convening and Brokering:** The best thing we can do may be to help bring the relevant actors together until they come up with some possible solutions to try out. Often, an INGO or other outsider can keep them in the room there even when they are traditionally hostile to each other. This kind of approach, epitomised by our [Tajikistan water project](#), fits with the [Africa Power and Politics Programme's](#) findings that effective work on governance is not about fixing 'supply' or 'demand', but encouraging joint efforts to find solutions to collective action problems.

But this kind of work is an awfully long way from popular campaigning – would NGO campaigners even recognize it as ‘campaigning’?

**Solidarity:** Focus on the actor rather than the solution. I’ve always been a bit sceptical of NGOs who adopt a holier-than-thou position of ‘we support partners, we don’t impose our views’, not least because NGOs exert huge influence through the act of choosing one set of partners over another. But like default-to-process, complexity strengthens the argument for this approach.

All of these probably have trade-offs for campaigners, who are competing for attention from both press and public. Complicating your message, saying ‘we don’t have the answer’, saying ‘let’s try stuff and see what happens’ all blurs the edges of a nice crisp campaign message. But if the problem we are confronting is indeed complex, do we have any choice? Over to you, especially the campaigners among you.

