

# How to... influence the political process

Oxfam's campaigns target the people who decide on the policies that affect the lives of poor people. Typically these will be governments, international institutions (e.g. the World Trade Organisation), or multinational companies. Local campaigners rarely have direct access to these decision-makers, but you do have ways to influence them.

## You can be that change...

Local campaigners often have access to influential people, such as MPs and MEPs, as well as local members of political parties, local councillors, trades unionists and local managers of national or multinational companies. Depending on the particular issue, any of these could help to influence the way policies are shaped at national or even international level.

*A few things to consider before plunging into the actual campaigning:*

- Think about who is most likely to support the campaign, who may be persuaded to support the campaign, and who will almost certainly not support the campaign?

## Working with MPs

The most obvious way to persuade an MP to support a campaign is to meet or write to them, explaining calmly and rationally why you believe a particular policy is necessary to combat poverty.

Local media coverage will always be useful in persuading an MP that an issue is worth bothering about.

Ideally, you are trying to build a partnership with MPs and other influential people. Do not alienate them by being confrontational or over-demanding.

*Example of working with an uncommitted MP*

A local Oxfam campaigner got her MP to attend a joint event: the opening of a book department in an Oxfam shop and local lobby for the Trade Justice Movement. The MP was happy to be associated with both the shop and the campaign, and **had his picture taken with campaigners** outside the shop. The MP found it easy to support the campaign because the event was positive and locally significant.

MPs are always keen to get positive media coverage, but rarely have much time to spare, so it is best to find a way for them to express their support publicly without having to spend a long time doing it.

Regional Oxfam campaigns staff often already have good relationships with supportive MPs, in which case, media

contact should be co-ordinated with them, to avoid MPs receiving mixed messages.

*Example of working with a supportive MP*

An Oxfam Group Co-ordinator arranged to publicly interview a local and supportive MP about the failure of the G8 to tackle poverty. The event was a success and, crucially, local media were persuaded to come along. Television, radio and newspapers covered the interview. This greatly increased the number of people that the message reached, thus making it an event other influential politicians would take note of. Because the MP gained plenty of good media coverage, it strengthened her relationship with Oxfam.

*Insider campaigning in action*

An Oxfam group member who is also a Labour Party member proposed a motion to his local party that called for funding to Iraq not to be taken from the DfID budget. He reports: "I was not optimistic but was delighted that it passed by 13 votes to 1. **It will now go probably to the Prime Minister...**" In cases like this, pressure is put upon policy-makers, regardless of the MP's position on the issue.

## Visiting your MP

Your MP may run surgeries on an informal "drop-in" basis (first-come-first-served), or may expect you to make an appointment. For the informal surgeries, we advise you to turn up as early as possible. Details of surgeries are often advertised in the local press.

You can also contact your MP's office directly. The office will advise you on how and when you can meet your MP.

## The visit

If you haven't met your MP before, introduce yourself as a constituent who has a deep concern about the issue – a concern shown by your support of organisations such as Oxfam.

Your MP will not expect you to have the same level of understanding and knowledge as a policy specialist. You simply need to convey your concern about the issue, and the need for the MP to take action.

It is a good idea to write a follow-up letter to thank your MP for his or her time, state what you understood to be the outcomes of the meeting, and remind the MP of the actions which he or she agreed to take on your behalf.

**Let us know how you get on. email [active@oxfam.org.uk](mailto:active@oxfam.org.uk)**