

## Activism or research communication? Research organisations could be muzzled by UK charity anti-advocacy clause.

*Think tanks and research organisations should not ignore the row that has broken out over the recent announcement by the UK government to introduce an anti-advocacy clause into all charity grants.*

**James Georgalakis** argues that this move, if fully implemented could have serious consequences for research-based charities seeking to support evidence based policy making, despite the government's focus on research uptake.



It may be tempting for some research organisations to dismiss the [anti-advocacy clause for charities](#) as irrelevant to their mission. Surely we are the honest brokers who deliver robust evidence to inform policy and practice? We don't do advocacy and we are not in the habit of lobbying government. But just consider the definition of lobbying given in the [Cabinet Office's interim guidance](#) to government departments: "activity intended to influence or attempt to influence Parliament, government or political parties." Just how exactly is this different to what we do every time we seek to make policy recommendations and encourage policy debate based on our research agendas?

### Research grants inform and critique policy

As astutely pointed out by the [National Council for Voluntary Organisations](#) the key purpose of many government grants is to support charities' engagement in policymaking. This is equally true for charities drawing on their experience of delivering front line services in the UK as it is for research organisations gathering evidence to provide policy advice to Whitehall officials. Just because we don't march on Westminster with placards and megaphones does not mean research organisations are not actively engaging in the policy making process and seeking to inform key debates.



**Image credit: Jorge Royan The lobby of the House of Lords and the House of Commons. (CC BY-SA 3.0)**

In fact, in international development research the government has made it quite clear that it sees the policy relevance of research and research teams' capacity to influence policy and practice as a key component of its commitment to value for money. The Department for International Development (DFID) increasingly shape research grants around the critical assessment of current development interventions (including their own) and the production and wide dissemination of practical solutions to key development challenges.

### **Activism or research communications?**

Some may still prefer to draw a line between activism and research communications. However, where exactly does one draw the line? Does a parliamentary event at which research results are presented that appear to challenge government policy go too far? Does a policy briefing that makes specific recommendations count if it is shared widely across social media? If we blog or generate media articles that challenge the government to respond to new evidence does that place us in the firing line? The guidelines do mention the possibility of 'exceptional cases' where grants fund research that may produce recommendations that challenge government policy. Just how these qualifications will be made and what types of activities will be deemed acceptable is not explained. This is far from reassuring.

There is also a strange anomaly in that there is no mention of research council funding with its overt focus on policy impact. Has this type of grant simply escaped Matthew Hancock's attention or is this somehow deemed better value for money for the UK tax payer than research grants received directly by charities from government departments? Meanwhile, for those of us working on international issues there is the somewhat dubious comfort that attempting to influence foreign governments is deemed acceptable. They'd just like us to leave them alone!

Just consider this example from the Institute of Development Studies (IDS). In 2013 we began publishing an annual index showing countries' political commitment to reducing malnutrition. This was at least part funded through an accountable grant from DFID. [The global index](#) compared the efforts of developing countries and quickly became an essential tool for campaigners, such as MPs and civil society organisations in places like Tanzania and Mozambique to hold their governments to account.

Meanwhile, we also published and widely promoted in the media and to UK parliamentarians an [index of donor countries](#)' commitment. In this the UK did well – coming out on top of a list of 23 OECD countries. There is no doubt that this project aimed to provide campaigners with a transparency tool and our own media work and social media activity sought to actively influence the debate just as it was high on the UK political agenda (in 2013 the UK government co-hosted a global hunger event). However, the anti-advocacy clause would, if taken at face value, demand that DFID take a dim view of this work. Even stranger, the guidelines suggest we would be free to publicise the data relating to foreign governments and actively engage with parliamentarians in developing countries but not promote the data on the UK government's own track record.

## Unintended consequences or malicious intent?

So is this a case of unintended consequences or malicious intent? Whatever your view on this there is no doubt that think tanks and research organisations that value their independence and their ability to mobilise knowledge for impact on policy need to be deeply concerned about this clause. It has often been our DFID grant funded work that has provided some of the richest interactions with UK government and parliament. Just as UK charities working at the coal face of social care, education and health do not want to be muzzled by this clause, knowledge brokers in the research sector must also strive to remain able to engage critically with government and to leverage wider public awareness of research evidence.

We will be seeking clarification from DFID and the Cabinet office and I urge all those who fear they may be affected to do the same. You can [follow a lively debate on this on Twitter: #antiadvocacy](#)

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.*

## About the Author

**James Georgalakis** is the Director of Communications and Impact at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), with overall leadership of the Institute's communications, impact and engagement work. He also leads the ESRC DFID Impact Initiative for International Development Research. Previously the Head of Communications at IDS, James oversaw the publications program, web and social media strategy and media and public affairs activities. He has worked in the not-for-profit sector since 2000, predominantly in media and advocacy communications roles and has extensive experience of travelling with journalists, photographers and film crews in developing countries and has facilitated communications and policy engagement workshops in many locations in South and Central Asia, Africa, Eastern Europe and the UK.

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