

CASE STUDY 3

Leveraging windows of opportunity to advance on an advocacy issue: NCDs-Vietnam and the 2019 alcohol control law

Background

With alcohol consumption on the rise in Vietnam (an estimated 50% increase between 2002 and 2016), a draft law to curb alcohol consumption, under development since 2008, was released to the public in April 2018. Seizing this advocacy window of opportunity, NCDs-Vietnam (NCDs-VN) devised a strategy to counter alcohol industry opposition to the bill and to build public support for its passage. Facing a lack of public awareness of the benefits of the law coupled with the alcohol industry's misinformation campaign targeting the National Assembly, NCDs-VN built a strong civil society coalition to raise public awareness, refocus the debate on scientific evidence, help dispel the myths perpetuated by the industry, and expose industry manipulation of the policy process. This advocacy contributed to the successful passage of the law in June 2019, and while it was significantly weakened throughout the drafting process with many of the WHO Best Buy policy measures removed, the law is considered a critical milestone, accelerating the country's commitment to NCD prevention by reducing an important NCD risk factor.

Advocacy strategy

NCDs-VN rolled out a phased campaign with distinct triggers. The first phase of the campaign seized the momentum of the 2018 United National High-Level Meeting on NCDs to target the National Assembly's first vote on the bill. A series of four alcohol-related teenage rape cases and accidents in the month before the Assembly's final vote on the law triggered the next phase of the campaign. Some of the specific tactics they used include:

- Leveraging community-based evidence to expand the evidence base beyond the scientific literature and producing relatable narratives, to educate the public and policymakers on why the law mattered.
- Inviting reporters to workshops with victims of alcohol-related harm and their families to ensure that their stories appeared in official and social media.
- Sending public letters to decision-makers and industry spokespeople to respond to misinformation and attempts to derail or weaken the law.
- Linking advocacy efforts to an anti-corruption campaign run by the Ministry of Politics and exposing industry sympathisers within the government system.
- Using social media (Facebook) as a tool to expose industry interference in policy development, update the public on the discussions of the law at the National Assembly, and raise campaign resources.

Analysis

NCDs-VN planned an innovative advocacy campaign tracking the law from start to finish. The initiative displayed agility and swiftness in responding to the advocacy triggers and seizing the windows of opportunity, such as the 2018 United Nations High-Level Meeting on NCDs, National Assembly meetings, and the tragic alcohol-related deaths.

The alliance also displayed flexibility in employing a variety of strategies: working with the Ministry of Health, voicing NCD civil society views at government and National Assembly workshops, writing letters to political leaders, using the media, and enabling victims of alcohol harm to speak at political platforms.

Recommendations

NCD-VN's campaign offers key lessons in how to leverage strategic windows of opportunity, employing triggers and planned phases, and piggybacking on the anti-corruption platform to advance NCD policy advocacy against opposition from unhealthy commodity industries. Some specific recommendations include:

- Capitalise on political or social momentum to launch a campaign on an issue with great potential for a win.
- Use anti-corruption platforms to identify and expose pro-industry players.
- Augment international evidence and resources with local data and contributions.
- Use social media to get around mainstream media blocks.
- Release communication with the government to the public for education, transparency and advocacy purposes.
- Build your own infrastructure for live shows for swift dissemination via social and mass media.