

## Tip Sheet 11

### Key Questions: Questions you should ask yourself (and be able to answer) before you ask to meet with a Government Minister

#### What change do you want to make? What is your key “ask”?

*Before you ask a politician or decision maker to listen to you, you need to know what you want from them and it needs to be something that they can give you.*

- Don't ask for a meeting just to get to know them, or to introduce your organisation and tell them how wonderful it is. You need to know what you want (e.g. community based rapid testing); why it should be done (cost efficiency, increased testing, reaching key populations); how it can be done (the regulation that needs changing) and who else supports it (UNAIDS, WHO, give examples of it working).
- Sometimes you might simply run into the politician, or their staff, at an event. Have your key ask always ready and clear in your mind, so that you can confidently say “*Can we meet to discuss X, Madame Minister?*” and explain why in only a couple of sentences. This is known as an “elevator pitch” - it's how you would sell your story or your request in the time it takes to take an elevator between floors.
- It may help to have your top policy asks, and the key reasons for them, each condensed into one page or briefing, ready for use at any time. [Here](#) is an example.

#### Who can make it happen? Who should you prioritise to influence?

*Although a Government Minister is the obvious target, they are very busy people and often not expert in your issue – they may rely on their researchers for a little topline knowledge.*

- Research who can actually make the change you want. It may be more appropriate to influence their permanent Ministry officials, or a national healthcare regulatory body. You may have to work your way up through levels of bureaucracy, convincing people along the way. Make a target map to help you prioritise who to speak to. (*insert diagram of sample target map here*)
- Before approaching them, find out what you can about their track record on the issue and related topics and their own background. What posts have they held before? Do they have medical training? Might they have personal knowledge of HIV? Their views on key populations and sex in general? If they are an elected politician, how safe is their position (this often affects how willing they will be to take up a controversial issue)? This should inform how you approach them and even the language you may use – a trained doctor or nurse will likely need less explanation of terminology, for example.
- Keep a note of anyone in political power who supports your cause. They may move into a position where they have power over the issue, or they may be friends with the person who does. They are always worth briefing too.

#### What or who will persuade them to take up your issue?

*This research may also tell you how to frame your case.*

- If they were a human rights lawyer in their past, those arguments will count; if they were in the Finance Ministry, they may want the cost-benefit analysis.

- Who are their friends and what other interests do they have? Being able to show the support of someone they respect and trust, like an “elder statesperson” or a public figure, may help your case.
- At the other end of the career ladder, you should always be nice to junior officials because (apart from it just being polite anyway) you never know who will end up being the Minister's diary secretary or their policy advisor later in their career.
- Policy or research staff are particularly useful and it's worth, if you can, holding a briefing event on HIV (or wider sexual health or blood-borne viruses, as appropriate) for interns and policy advisors at the start of any new Government term.
- The other constant influence on most politicians and official is the media, both mainstream and social. A “hot topic” will always get a Minister's attention – but it is important that they see people supporting the issue, not that it is unpopular.

### What is the best way to reach them?

*You've found the person that you need to talk to, the one who can make change for you.*

- The obvious way to reach them is simply to ask for an appointment. But unless they already know you or your organisation, or the issue is very big, then you are likely to get handed on to an official, or a researcher, or someone else junior.
- Getting their attention (so that they accept your request to meet) may involve a number of “nudges”; getting one of their local voters to raise the issue with them, getting a colleague they trust to raise it, meeting them “accidentally” at a social event, asking them a question at a political meeting getting coverage in the media.
- Social media is surprisingly open because it is new – it is still possible to engage directly, if briefly, with many politicians on e.g. Twitter, provided you are polite and supportive (“@mrbig101 community HIV testing is cost effective and popular – have u considered it?” rather than “ @mrbig101 Ur an idiot wasting money on outdated HIV testing formats!!!”). This can, if you're lucky and they're intrigued, even lead to an invite to meet.

### What alliances can you make that will strengthen your case?

*Politicians love to see alliances. It shows that an issue is popular and/or important.*

- Can you show that a range of HIV interests support your view, including clinicians and researchers?
- Is this issue wider than just HIV, so other, larger health campaigns might support you
- Politicians are surprisingly impressed by people with academic titles like “Doctor” or “Professor”, and more likely to respond to a campaign which has many stakeholders than a single group.
- Although it has nothing to do with making your case, the other thing that impresses many politicians is famous people. A photo opportunity with a media-friendly “celebrity” as part of your meeting request can open doors – but be careful to ensure that anyone you take with you is briefed about the issue and will not say anything unhelpful. (*see also tip sheet 8 on building alliances*)

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