

The Dog That Doesn't Bark

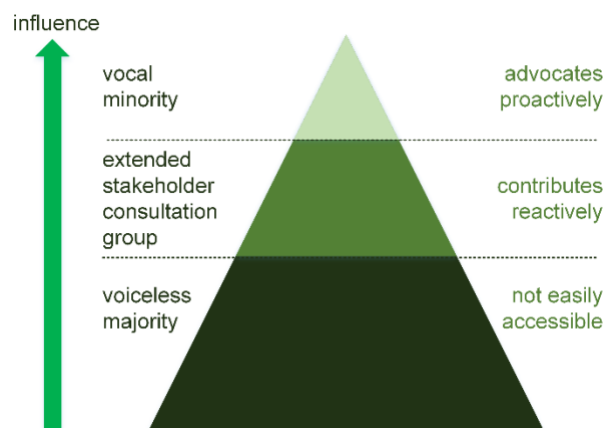
Publicly funded organisations typically shape their services based on feedback from vocal stakeholders. Other stakeholders, who may be equally in need, may be less able or willing to advocate for their own interests. For many organisations, properly understanding and serving the needs of a dog that doesn't bark requires a cultural shift, reimagining services to meet the needs of people who may not be rational actors, or articulate advocates.

Publicly funded organisations strive to maximise public value by identifying and meeting the needs of the populations they serve. Mechanisms for assessing and prioritising need are often imperfect, relying on historical allocations and demand patterns, and established organisational norms to determine how services will be delivered, and to whom.

Demand is easy to measure, but need is harder to define. Some need is hidden and never presents as demand. Some apparent demand reflects poorly targeted services consumed by people who do not really need services. Without ready access to the views and experiences of all the people they serve, organisations often rely on vocal minorities as proxies for much larger and more complex populations. This can ignore pockets of need that are neither well met, nor well represented by the loudest advocates.

Stakeholders cannot always advocate effectively for their own interests. Some will not fully understand their needs, such as young children and people with some types of illnesses or disabilities. Others have difficulty communicating their needs, such as people with poor language skills. These groups are typically underrepresented, or imperfectly represented by professional advocates or subsets of the group.

Some stakeholders do not know what they stand to gain or lose from changes to public policy. A public housing tenant at risk of losing their home knows the immediate consequences of that change and is more motivated to advocate against it than unnamed dozens who may benefit from a new apartment block. Similarly, publicly funded organisations are often rewarded more for meeting visible and accessible needs than from finding and solving hidden problems.



While vocal stakeholders can be useful partners for publicly funded organisations, they usually represent only the tip of a much greater iceberg. Placating vocal, but unrepresentative, interest groups rewards the formation of these groups and discourages policy makers from reaching out to stakeholders who may be more difficult to consult. This limits the opportunity to design and deliver genuinely equitable programs that respond to need.

Publicly funded organisations are called upon to recognise and respond to the needs of all stakeholders, not just the most vocal. This requires impartial assessments of need across an entire population of interest, not only rewarding its most vocal or articulate members.

Meeting the needs of less vocal stakeholders may mean working with them to increase their understanding of, and capacity to advocate, for their own interests. Humanising and publicising lesser known stories is legitimate work for publicly funded organisations working to meet the needs of highly affected but less visible stakeholders.

Publicly funded organisations that work with broad and representative groups of stakeholders are more likely to design and deliver policies and services that meet real needs. Cultivating input from more diverse stakeholders, including those who may not be obvious winners or losers, can help publicly funded organisations to deliver for all stakeholders, not just the ones that bark the loudest.