

Citizen Advisors

Carmen Malena
CIVICUS

Tool summary

Citizen Advisors (or citizen advice bureaus) are an independent, non-governmental service, designed to provide citizens with information and advice about issues of public interest, such as social services, human rights, finances, child protection, and consumer protection. In some countries, they are a tool for empowerment, providing advice services to help people exercise their rights and shape social policy. They also play an important role in feeding information about citizen problems back to government actors and facilitating direct relations between citizens and the state. The model of Citizens Advisors was first created in Britain in 1938, where the service is now well established with more than 3,500 service points across the United Kingdom. The value of this type of community service has become widely recognized and today similar services exist in more than 20 countries around the world.

What is it?

When the first organization was created in Britain, it was in direct response to threats of war and the desire to help meet the needs of people in war time. Since then, the role of Citizen Advisors or Advice Bureaux has greatly evolved in the United Kingdom where free, confidential and independent advice may be obtained about issues relating to debt, employment, immigration, housing, and various legal and consumer problems. The Citizens Advice Bureau also gathers evidence of problems to be used to campaign for changes in services or policies. In Cambodia, Citizen Advisors are playing a much different role by assisting people especially in remote areas in addressing problems related to domestic violence, land issues, and discrimination. They are also playing a crucial outreach role in the Khmer Rouge Tribunal Project, assisting people to participate in the trials of people accused of crimes against humanity during the Khmer Rouge regime, and providing information about the rule of law.

All the Citizen Advice services discussed here are autonomous, non-governmental, non-profit organizations while functioning independently of the state, though they very often work in close collaboration with public service providers, ombudsmen, or local government authorities. The services they provide are free, and may be obtained either in person, over telephone, and increasingly through e-mail.

The Citizen Advice services are distinctly different from the Citizen Advisors or Advice Bureaux created by government agencies in various countries. Though the state-driven services can serve a useful role, they are not always accessible or proactive, nor are they considered a “neutral” source of information or advice since they are part of the government bureaucracy.

Citizen Advisor Bureaus sometimes have one or two paid staff but are typically managed and operated by volunteers. They frequently benefit from the *pro bono* services of professionals such as lawyers, financial managers, social workers and other specialists. In the UK, for example, the Citizen Advice service is one of the largest volunteer organisations in the country with over 20,000 volunteers. A majority of these are part-time volunteer advisers with varying levels of training. Due to ever increasing volume and complexity of queries, many Citizen Advice Bureaus are being compelled to employ more staff to cope with constantly changing legislation.

In general terms, the key roles of Citizen Advisors are to:

- provide citizens with relevant **information** (about their rights, entitlements, responsibilities, public policies and services);
- **support** citizens in exercising their rights, fulfilling their duties, resolving problems and participating in public life; and
- **advocate** for and defend citizens' rights and well-being (e.g. by lobbying for policy changes or improvements in public services at local or national level).

How is it done?

In addition to being available for directly talking to people, Citizen Advisors fulfil their roles through a variety of mechanisms and activities:

1. Information services

Published information sheets and guides: [Citizen Advice New Zealand](#), for example, publishes a series of information sheets on issues such as court procedures, neighbourhood disputes and benefit appeals, and has developed a set of bicultural guidelines to improve service delivery to the Maori. [Citizen Advice in the UK](#) has published a Legal Information Guide, as well as a very popular Guide to Citizens' Rights which explains changes to British laws, regulations and policies (such as updates on new rules about quality standards and discrimination on the basis of sexuality and religion), and provides practical information and advice on a range of day-to-day issues and problems.

Electronic information and services: Many citizen advice services, especially in developed countries maintain comprehensive and regularly updated information and referral databases, and make information available to citizens through internet. The [virtual Citizen Advice Bureau in Israel](#) is one such example.

Mass media: Citizen advice services also frequently use the mass media to raise awareness and share information about priority public issues like for e.g. by organizing press conferences, issuing press statements or participating in/organizing radio programmes. [Citizen Advice New Zealand](#), for example, has organised 'Awareness Weeks' to focus media attention on a priority public issue.

2. Support services

In addition to providing information, trained advisors can help draft letters, make phone calls, negotiate with creditors, take cases to tribunals and court, and facilitate citizen interactions and relations with public authorities.

Walk-in services: Citizen advisory services recruit and train large numbers of volunteers in order to ensure that support services are available at the local level and that offices or individual advisors are accessible to citizens close to home. For example, Citizen Advice New Zealand has 90 locations across the country and in the UK there are more than 3,500 service points.

Call-in services: Many citizen advice services also provide toll-free call-in services and offer personalised information, advice and support over the phone.

3. Advocacy/influencing change

Citizen Advisors are well placed to comment on social issues due to their vast experience of working with clients. Citizen advice services often collect and aggregate evidence of clients' problems and use this information to campaign for changes in national and local policies and services. In many countries, Citizen Advisors consider it one of their key roles to speak up for clients, raise and debate issues in the public sphere, and interact with and influence public policy-makers and decision-takers. Some of their advocacy activities include:

Publishing evidence reports, studies and briefings: Evidence gained by helping people resolve problems provides citizen advisors with extremely rich and detailed evidence and data regarding defective or unfair laws, policies and practices and their impact on the public. Citizen advice services such as those in the [United Kingdom](#), Australia and New Zealand use this data to regularly publish and disseminate evidence reports and briefings on a wide range of issues.

Consultations: As a result of their knowledge, evidence base and credibility, Citizen Advisors are frequently consulted and called upon to comment and articulate perspectives on various issues of public concern such as for e.g. in the context of legal reforms and social policy formulation.

Commenting on the proposed policies and laws: Many citizen advice services are proactively engaged in policy analysis and comment on draft policies, laws, other public documents and decisions. A useful case in point is the work of [Citizen Advice Scotland](#).

Work with Parliament: In the U.K for example, Citizen Advice staff brief Members of Parliament (MP) and Members of the National Assembly for Wales on the key issues affecting the Citizen Advice service and their clients. In addition to holding regular briefing meetings with Parliamentarians with regard to key bills, they also contribute evidence to Select Committee inquiries, organize two All Party Parliamentary Groups, support MPs to work effectively with advice bureaus at a constituency level, and manage an extensive presence of citizen advisors at the party political conferences.

Citizen Advice also organizes an annual Parliamentary Reception to recognize the outstanding contributions of Parliamentarians.

4. Principles of best operative practices: Some of the principles of best operative practices for citizen advice services are:

Independence from political, religious, business or other interests: Ideally, Citizen Advisors must be independent from local or central government bodies without motivation for financial, material or any other interests.

Impartiality: Services must be offered to all citizens, irrespective of their social status, cultural background, religious faiths, race, gender, financial level, sexual orientation, etc.

Free of charge: Services must be made available free of charge in order to ensure universal accessibility and equity.

Confidentiality: Citizen Advisors must maintain strict confidentiality about citizens' problems and not reveal citizens' personal details to anyone outside the organization, without the formal permission of the client.

Standards, rules and conditions_for establishing a Citizen Advice Bureau are nicely summarized on the website of the [Polish Union of Citizen Advice Bureaux](#).

Benefits

In a nutshell, Citizen Advisors and advice services help solve problems that people have in their daily lives, be it in housing, employment, legal rights, immigration, or consumer issues, and it's accomplished at no cost to the individual. In the UK for e.g. Citizens Advice Bureaux helps resolve nearly 5.5 million problems every year. Their information and advice website, which provides information in 15 languages, receives more than 600,000 visits per month.

They can also bear an impact on broader social policy issues. For e.g. the Citizens Advice Scotland has documented clear evidence of positive impact with regard to civil justice reforms, improvements in funding for legal aid, welfare reforms, and water and sewage credits. [Citizen Advice UK](#) also documents evidence of the concrete impacts of its social policy work on an annual basis.

Challenges and lessons

Fund raising: Given that citizen advice services are non-governmental and not-for-profit initiatives, fund raising is an absolute necessity and a frequent challenge. In Poland for example, since the Union of Citizen Advice Bureaus is a public benefit organization, there is a provision for citizens to contribute 1% of their personal income tax to the Union, which also raises funds from several private foundations, foreign embassies and other sponsors.

Training: As most of the personnel involved in citizen advice services are volunteers, recruiting competent persons and ensuring they receive adequate and continuous training can be a challenge and particularly so in developing countries. In Cambodia for example, the Khmer Institute for Democracy has trained over 70 Citizen Advisors and 18 master trainers (on issues such as democracy, human rights, Family Law, Law on Prevention of Domestic Violence, Adultery Law, Land Law and Criminal Law). However, due to resource constraints, the breadth and depth of training is limited while providing continuous learning opportunities has become a difficult task.

Coordination: Ensuring consistent standards and practices and effective aggregation of the data for the purposes of advocacy/lobbying requires a high level of coordination amongst individual citizen advisors and the bureaus. In the UK for example, all the Citizen Advice Bureaux in England, Wales and Northern Ireland are members of Citizens Advice, a national charity which sets standards for advice and equal opportunities, and supports bureaus with an information system, training and other services. Citizens Advice also co-ordinates social policy, media publicity and parliamentary work and maintains a national information and advice website. In Romania, the Union of Citizen Advice Bureaux also provides a central coordinating and supportive role to citizen advice organizations through networking, elaborating and updating information materials, establishing links with both governmental and non-governmental organisations, arranging trainings for advice staff and establishing and monitoring compliance with operational standards and rules.

Key resources

Citizens Advice International, Brussels.

www.citizensadvice-international.org

- ☞ Launched in 2004, Citizens Advice International (CAI) is a non-governmental international body, representing interests of organizations providing free citizen advice around the world. CAI's main services are: to promote throughout the world the provision of free, impartial and confidential advice and information to the public about their rights and responsibilities; to represent the interests of its members viz. independent non-governmental bodies, with all supranational bodies, including the European Union and other international institutions; and to ensure constant exchange of information on professional advice among citizens advice providers in Europe and New Zealand, build partnerships, improve services based on sharing of good practices.

Citizen Advice national level organizations

Citizens Advice Australia

<http://www.citizensadvice.org.au>

Citizen Advice Bureaux New Zealand

<http://www.cab.org.nz/>

Citizens Advice Poland

<http://www.zbpo.org.pl>

Citizens Advice Romania

http://www.robcc.ro/despre_bcc.aspx

Citizens Advice Bureau Scotland

<http://www.cas.org.uk/webdefault.aspx>

Citizens Advice Bureau UK

<http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/>

- ☞ The websites of six national level Citizen Advice organizations provide valuable and exhaustive information on the concept, methodology, operational practices and experiences pertaining to Citizen Advisors.

Case studies

New Zealand: “The Forgotten People: The Experience of Recent Immigrants to New Zealand” is the title of the report prepared by The New Zealand Association of Citizen Advice Bureaux which was concerned about the growing number of enquiries from immigrants about their problems and issues in the year 1998-99. It undertook several studies and made a number of policy recommendations towards resolving the crisis faced by immigrants. Citizens Advice Bureaux New Zealand also regularly issues reports on social issues based on experience with citizens, including a recent one on housing and proposed residential tenancies legislation. For more information, visit:

http://www.cab.org.nz/issues/policy/Forgotten_People_report.html
<http://www.cab.org.nz/issues/index.html>

Cambodia: The Khmer Institute of Democracy started a Proto-Ombudsman Program (Citizen Advisor Project) in 1999 to train Advisors to work around the country for assisting local people primarily in the remote areas to help them understand the rule of law and their rights, how to prevent and resolve conflict, and to promote peace-building. Citizen Advisors have also been trained under the Khmer Rouge project, to help citizens participate in the trials of former Khmer Rouge officials charged with crimes against humanity. Human Rights Education Associates (HREA) is also running a paralegal training programme for Citizen Advisors working in the provinces. The websites listed here do not offer an evaluation of their role but provide some insight into the nature of work being carried out by the Advisors.

For more information on Proto-Ombudsman Citizen Advisor project, visit:
Khmer Institute of Democracy (KID)

http://www.kidcambodia.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=3&Itemid=4

For more information on Citizen Advisor programme under Khmer Rouge project, visit: <http://www.khmerrough.com/citizen.htm>

<http://www.khmerrough.com/pdf/OutreachActivities.pdf>

<http://www3.online.com.kh/users/kid/>

For more information on the HREA programme, read the “Notes from Cambodia” written by Felisa Tibbits in 2005, visit:

http://www.hrea.org/index.php?base_id=199