

Why Does the IVA Discourage Donations? (And Why Does it Exist At All?)

I - Introduction

Having been asked by many people how to donate to the International Vegan Association, we felt obligated to publicly state our position on donations. So we began writing this position paper to explain our decision to not solicit (and to generally refuse) donations from the public.

But we soon found that laying out our position on donations would be impossible without also explaining our views on a number of closely related issues. So this position paper, while ultimately directed at the issue of donations, in fact offers broader reflections on the significant risks and potential harms caused by formal organizations within our movement, on the importance of individual advocacy, on the limited positive role that carefully administered groups can play, and on the existence of the IVA itself. Our position on donations, which comes in the final two sections, is an obvious consequence of what comes before.

II - The Costs, Risks, and Harms of Advocacy Organizations

The IVA's mission is to educate the public and its volunteers about veganism and animal rights, strictly within the abolitionist framework developed by Professor Gary L. Francione over the past several decades. In light of this mandate, one might assume that the IVA would be troubled by Prof. Francione's recent [critical remarks](#) about "abolitionist vegan"-labelled advocacy organizations. If the founding and central researcher within the abolitionist tradition—and the individual whose views our group aspires to share with the world—is critical of the formation of groups like ours, then wouldn't this be cause for concern within the IVA?

Yes and no. No, we are not troubled by Francione's criticisms, because we firmly agree with everything he has said. (And we doubt that anyone familiar with Francione's work on the history of the so-called animal rights movement could be surprised by his remarks.) But, yes, at the same time, because we agree with Francione's criticisms, we feel a tension in founding and running yet another organization. We are not above or immune to Francione's worries. There are serious questions about whether the IVA should exist at all. No bones about it: there are extremely strong reasons *not* to found or work with an organization.

So let's be upfront about what some of those reasons are. We can begin with a (relatively) mundane concern.

First, consider that building and maintaining a group generally involves a considerable administrative effort that is not, itself, an act of advocacy or education. For example, depending on the size and scope of the group, running an organization can involve administrative meetings and keeping minutes, preparing articles of incorporation, applying for charitable status, drafting the policies and procedures for the organization, filing tax returns, writing and distributing newsletters, maintaining social media accounts, ensuring the ongoing compliance of the organization with all local, state, and federal laws, and a whole lot more. And not one of these things, in itself, has much to do with abolitionist advocacy. All of the time spent on these activities could instead be dedicated to educational work, rather than group administration.

It is tempting to look at these practical concerns and think “Well, sure, it takes a bit of work, but we’ll get *so much more done* once we’re operating as a group.” But within the context of abolitionist advocacy, it is unclear why this would generally be true. As Francione has argued for years, and as we have agreed in our recent [position papers](#), the cornerstone of abolitionist advocacy requires no infrastructure at all—it requires only a willingness to read, think, and then head out into the world and talk to others about veganism and animal use. It is uncommon that individuals working as a formal group are able to accomplish so much under the banner of an organization that they offset the administrative and practical burdens of group-running.

This is a serious problem, but it is only the tip of the iceberg. Organizing and maintaining an advocacy organization is not only inefficient, but often downright harmful.

There are more and less nefarious ways in which organization-running can cause harm to the abolitionist movement. On the less-nefarious end of the spectrum, groups can be injurious to the movement simply because they add more “noise” and distraction to an already furiously crowded space. The animal-protection space is filled with seemingly uncountably many names and acronyms: Farm Sanctuary, Wayne Pacelle, PeTA, Friends of Animals, Karen Davis, Vegan Outreach, Mercy for Animals, HSUS, Ingrid Newkirk, TAVS, COK, Gene Bauer, the Vegan Society, United Poultry Concerns, and so on, and so on, and so on. There are too many animal-protection entities to list.

Within this environment, Francione’s abolitionism aims to provide a crucial alternative which both diagnoses the failures of the animal movement and offers a new way forward. It is difficult enough to cut through the cacophony of the animal-protection industry to introduce people to Francione’s work and to the concept of abolitionism. Adding yet another group name or acronym and a list of further so-called “leaders” and “directors” only makes things harder. Everything else being equal, a new group is just another distraction. What we need is not more groups, it’s more individuals communicating the abolitionist position to their friends, family, and the public.

On the more-nefarious end of the spectrum, groups can harm the movement not only because they add more noise, but because they actively corrupt and distort movement ideals. In some cases, this corruption and distortion is caused by ignorance and inexperience; in other cases, it is caused by organizational self-preservation, careerism, and other forms of self-interest. It's worth briefly focusing on one path to corruption and distortion that has been particularly prevalent within the [history of the animal protection movement](#).

Many (perhaps most) animal organizations are formed for “the sake of the animals.” But, over time, a group generally begins to run as if it exists, at least in part, for its own sake. As a group gets older and increases in size and scope, as it engages in branding and organizational promotion, as its directors attempt to stand out within a crowded movement, as the organization takes on interns or salaried employees, as the group's leaders begin to see their own identities as bound up with the success of the group, as the organization networks and collaborates with other groups, and as it works to attract and please donors, the group will naturally begin to focus more of its attention on the sustenance of the group itself.

The problem in all of this is that the goal of *sustaining the group* is generally in tension with the goal of *doing good work*. In a perfect world, doing good work would be enough to ensure an organization's survival, and maintaining a group would ensure that more good work is accomplished. But this way of thinking isn't just idealistic, it's dangerously fantastical. The reality is that organization-oriented activities like branding, hiring and paying employees, networking, promoting leaders' public profiles, and fundraising are rarely connected to doing good work at all.

Suppose that an organization wants to promote the profile of its “Executive Director,” or wants to raise money for a salaried employee or campaign, or wants to stand out amongst the crowd and justify its existence. In any case, what's required is not just good work, but *differentiation*. For a leader to be taken seriously, or for donors to pay attention, or for the movement to care about this group, there has to be something *different* and *noteworthy* about what the group is doing. In this environment, a group's mandate and behavior is likely to be directed by what is *good for the group* rather than what is *good for the movement*.

This pressure toward differentiation is responsible for a great deal of the corruption and distortion within the history of the animal protection movement. Some groups embrace single-issue campaigns that allow for quick “victories” (and payoffs). Some organizations engage in self-aggrandizing branding work that has no educational value. Some groups duplicitously distance themselves from their ideological roots in order to appear as though they are making novel contributions. The animal protection movement is a decades-long tragedy detailing the boundlessness of corruption. While this tragedy has been unfolding, it has become clear that groups are not the key to abolitionism's success. All that abolitionism needs to succeed is a groundswell of passionate, individual educators who are willing to speak to others about veganism and animal rights.

III - So Why Does the IVA Exist At All?

In light of all of the above, why on earth would anyone start a group? Why does the IVA exist at all?

The IVA was created with a highly specific purpose in mind: to help educate the public about veganism and animal rights by distributing high-quality abolitionist educational resources: pamphlets, reading group materials for regional activists, advocacy practice group “kits,” position papers on challenging topics, and more. Although we firmly believe that every crucial element of the abolitionist approach is found within Gary Francione’s work, we also believe that there is some work to be done in building educational resources that complement Francione’s research. We could not reasonably expect a single person (Francione) to build all of the resources to be used within a worldwide grassroots movement. The IVA is intended to offer modest help in that regard.

This does not yet explain why the IVA exists. You should wonder: “Why have the IVA’s volunteers not simply worked as independent advocates to build and distribute these educational resources? Why incorporate as a formal organization?”

The answer is a bit boring: although our work requires very little money, it does require some. Our highest expenses (by far) come from printing and shipping our pamphlets across the world. Beyond those significant expenses, our costs are limited to basics: web hosting fees, supplies for tabling and running meetings, and other relatively insignificant items. Our work is funded by a very small number of private donors, and it is important to these donors that their contributions are tax-deductible. For that reason, the IVA exists as a formal charitable organization, rather than an informal affiliation of individual abolitionist advocates. We formed the IVA reluctantly upon identifying a helpful role that we could play and the financial realities of playing that role, rather than because we were interested in forming a group.

This is a decent story, but it does not show that the IVA is avoiding any of the concerns raised in the previous section. It is likely that many problematic organizations have come from innocent beginnings. So, in the next section, we will explain some of the steps that the IVA is taking to try to ensure its continued integrity and to avoid corrupting or distorting the ideals of abolitionist advocacy.

IV - Maintaining Our Integrity

Here are a few of the guiding commitments that we have made in order to help us avoid the problems outlined in Section II.

1. *We will not promote our organizers or volunteers.* Although the IVA is not seeking to hide its leaders and advocates, we are aiming to focus on our work rather than our names. Our goal is to provide abolitionist educational resources, not to carve out a role for ourselves within the movement.

2. *We will not have employees.* At no point will the IVA employ anyone in any capacity. The IVA is not a place for animal advocates to make money, and it never will be.

3. *We will avoid branding-focused initiatives.* It is sometimes helpful to have a simple banner or sign at a table or event to help ensure that one's work is perceived as legitimate or professional. But beyond creating these minimal implements, we actively avoid brand-focused initiatives. We will not produce IVA-branded shirts, buttons, mugs, stickers, or other materials that are intended only to spread our brand. We consider it highly ethically questionable for groups to use their resources to create and distribute these pointless materials.

4. *We will avoid non-organic organizational growth.* In addition to the online and distribution work of our organizers, we currently have a regional chapter in Boston. This is because one of the IVA's founding organizers lives in Boston. As two other IVA organizers live in Toronto, we may soon have an IVA chapter in Toronto. In the future, it is possible that other IVA chapters will appear if and when we have IVA organizers living in other cities. But at no point will we pursue growth as an end in itself. We would be content to never form another chapter. Our focus is on providing educational resources, and nothing more.

And now, finally, we can speak to the issue of donations.

5. *We do not solicit public donations.* And, in fact, the truth is a bit stronger: although we are a 501(c)(3) (tax-exempt) charity, we *discourage* people from donating to us and we have *refused* all unsolicited donations to this point. Our reasons should now be obvious. We do not need or want more money than we are currently using with the support of our private donors, and we have no interest in working to attract and please potential donors. We are not looking to grow, or print branded items, or fund trips, or pay salaries. We would much rather your money go toward a well-run animal rescue organization or to fostering and adopting animals to care for at home. And we believe that you should be skeptical of any purportedly education-focused group that asks for your money.

Beneath each of these five points is the underlying belief that our group's value is only instrumental: it is only good if it does good things. The IVA has no value in itself, and we will work vigorously to ensure that we are not treating our group as something to be maintained for its own sake. If we find that we can no longer do our work well under the auspices of the "International Vegan Association" name, then we are committed to disbanding the group immediately.

V - Conclusion

The position outlined in this paper may seem quite negative. But while it has a negative element, the broader picture is a positive and hopeful one. Organizations are often distracting and harmful to abolitionist goals, no doubt. But the important point is that, by and large, we do not need these organizations in the first place.

What we need is only the willingness of a well-informed mass of individuals to go out and speak to other people about what they know. For as long as it exists, the IVA will focus exclusively on aiding those individuals in their work. If the IVA stops existing at some point, it will be no critical loss. And that is a good thing, because it reminds us that the important work is to be done by individuals, not groups.