

Monitoring and evaluating advocacy

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Introduction

The limitations of project work and the need for more long-term structural solutions to poverty is increasingly recognised in the development community. Concurrently advocacy as a stated NGO activity has become increasingly important, though in some cases there is a lack of clarity about what this means in practice. Over the last few years ActionAid has refocused much of its work to support civil society, strengthen social capital, and support excluded groups in collective efforts to hold decision makers accountable.

Given these increasing resources committed to advocacy, it is important that we can understand what makes this work effective – how and when does it really make a difference to poor and marginalised people? How can we learn to do it better? The need for more understanding in this area is widely recognised. Indeed one of the five action points that participants signed up to in the Statement from the Conference that inspired this publication is the need to develop ‘broader ways of **defining and assessing success** in advocacy and citizen participation’:

Progress is often measured according to narrow, quantitative, and externally defined indicators. Systematic efforts are needed to develop alternative tools and methods which enable people to define their own indicators of success and to learn from their experience (Making Change Happen Conference Statement, 2001).

This is a challenge that ActionAid had already recognised. Over the next 3 years a team drawn from Brazil, Ghana, Nepal, Uganda, and the United Kingdom will be engaging in action research to explore this very issue. This work is at a very early stage – this article explains some of the thinking behind it.

Challenges and complexities of monitoring and evaluating advocacy work

Developing systems to monitor and evaluate advocacy is particularly challenging for a number of reasons:

- **Causal relationships:** The complexity of issues makes it difficult to determine cause and effect between NGO advocacy initiatives and outcomes. This is hard enough when undertaking targeted lobbying for a specific change in the law, but even harder when attempting to influence more general attitudes and values in society. In such complex systems it will always be difficult to pin down exactly what caused a certain impact, or the full effect of any action, even after the event. The influence of external factors are also unpredictable – i.e. the political situation, disasters, or opposition tactics may influence outcomes more than anything within the advocate’s control.
- **Compromise versus outright victory:** Outright victory, in the sense of achieving all the sought-after objectives, is rare – often compromise is necessary, with some objectives being jettisoned or modified. This introduces an element of subjectivity in determining whether gains were significant, whether small gains were consistent with the wider objectives of the campaign, or whether the campaign was coopted. There are likely to be a variety of opinions among different partners and stakeholders in a campaign. Indeed advocacy may bring together organisations that are not all trying to achieve the same thing.
- **A moving target:** the objectives of advocacy are moving targets sensitive to external factors. They will change as the environment changes through unrelated factors, as progress is made or when resistance and setbacks are encountered. Not only do objectives shift but the main action may also shift between international, national or local levels during the course of a campaign, making it unclear where success should be sought. It is even possible that success at one level can actually work against success at another level. This means that pre-set outcomes may not be the best yardstick by which to measure. Thus indicators of success may also need to change: an indicator that was relevant at the start of the campaign may lose that relevance as the campaign widens or changes its focus.
- **Advocacy can mean many things and is increasingly collective:** Advocacy includes a whole range of tactics such as influencing, lobbying, campaigning, demonstrations, boycotts, etc. Different

organisations work in different ways and advocacy increasingly takes place through networks and coalitions. Indeed, positive results may often reflect the sum of a variety of approaches, such as insider and outsider strategies. It may be difficult to assess which approach makes the difference; even harder to isolate the impact of a particular organisation. Claiming or measuring individual attribution may be counterproductive and harm cooperation. It may be more important to improve how organisations are working together for a common purpose.

- **Long-term policy work:** Furthermore, much advocacy work is long term. Policy reform can be slow and incremental and implementation, seen in terms of changes in people's lives, often lags significantly behind it. This poses a challenge in measuring impact as opposed to outcomes. Measuring policy change may not be sensitive enough to changes in the short term. It is also important to measure implementation of the policy, not only its formulation.
- **Limited accumulation of knowledge:** Advocacy work is often unique, rarely repeated or replicated, so that the gradual accumulation of knowledge by repetition does not happen. This does not mean that learning is impossible, but that reflection in order to make tacit knowledge explicit is even more important if lessons learnt from one initiative are to be carried through to the next.
- **A conflictual process:** Advocacy can be a conflictual process. Engaging in advocacy work can have political consequences in terms of groups' relationships with others. These consequences are hard to predict at the outset, and difficult to map.

Combined with these issues specific to advocacy work are other challenges that cut across all monitoring and evaluation:

- *Who* and *what* is the monitoring and evaluation for?
- How can monitoring and evaluation be participatory, involving stakeholders at all levels?
- How can gender and other social differences be fully taken into account?
- How can monitoring and evaluation be a basis for organisational learning?

The above poses a real challenge in developing useful methods to support meaningful learning in the area of advocacy work.

Incorporating different dimensions of success

All of these issues are compounded when organisations are unclear about what they want to achieve. Intermediate objectives or indicators may need to be

flexible, but an NGO must nevertheless be clear about its long-term goals, vision, and political understanding of advocacy, as this affects both the approaches taken and what is looked for in assessing impact.

Balancing advocacy work and capacity building

A campaign's success is frequently evaluated against a single short-term goal, such as winning immediate legislative or policy victories – a definition of success that ignores the long-term means to sustain such gains. Without strong systems or NGOs/ grassroots groups able to hold government accountable, policy victories can be short-lived.

Valerie Miller, one of the organisers of the workshop that inspired this publication, suggests that it is not uncommon for the leaders of NGOs and popular organisations to pay so much attention to lobbying work that they neglect their members' other concerns and the processes and activities that keep organisations strong and true to their full mission:

One serious dilemma in policy work is that while a campaign may be successful in getting policies changed or adopted, the process may diminish strength of the very institutions that help generate 'social capital' and which are necessary for achieving policy reform in a pluralistic society over the long term. This concern ... raises important questions about the need to place a higher priority on institutions and constituency building activities when designing policy influence efforts. If such activities are not incorporated and understood as a vital integral part of the process, policy work may actually undermine the institutional basis of civil society and the potential for promoting long-term social accountability and responsible government.¹

Changing public opinion and social norms

Indeed policy changes on their own are rarely enough to ensure changes in people's lives. For example legislative and policy changes in women's status are often several stages removed from the lived realities of women in Africa. In politically authoritarian contexts, the gap between policy and practice is most marked: high profile initiatives on behalf of women often bear little or no relation to the harsh realities of women and do little to change them. This is not to say that international or national policies or conventions have no use – indeed they can provide an important lever or tool for activists, but on their own they are rarely sufficient to make positive changes in poor or marginalised people's lives.

In some cases the discrepancy between what policies state and what is done may be because advocacy efforts have focused on influencing national-level policies with no corresponding effort directed at traditional practices and

¹ Valerie Miller, 1994.

customary laws that have a direct bearing on individual lives at the community level. For example, the constitutions of nearly all countries explicitly accord equal status and rights to men and women. That has not prevented customary laws from effectively barring women's access to land and inheritance in many societies².

For many issues, achieving change in public opinion or social norms may also need attention. These are important in themselves, but can also act as a route to put pressure on policy processes, and make policies more likely to be implemented:

Hard won gains can be dissipated unless there is constant vigilance over the law's application and interpretation. Legal reform strategies work best, after all, when the social value base is in concordance with the desired new norms. As long as the old regime of values is in effect, the tasks of making the new norms operative, or activating the educative function of law to change values, will be difficult and require action on many fronts.³

Recognising trade-offs

It is important to clarify the approach and ideology of the NGO, as the other dimensions of advocacy success are *not* an automatic result of all policy work. If NGOs act as intermediaries for a grassroots base who are merely clients, policy work can lead to the evolution of a civil society with a strong professional advocacy sector and a weak and disorganised grassroots base; this may do nothing to reduce the power of those being lobbied. Indeed, there may be tensions inherent in a campaign that attempts to influence both policy and civil society dimensions:

It often appears that trade-offs must be made, at least in the short term, between policy gains and strengthening grassroots associations. Lobbying actions sometimes can't wait for slower-paced grassroots education and participation efforts. Sometimes the strategies preferred by the grassroots frame the issues so that they are hard to win.⁴

Recognising there may be trade-offs is a start. But there is the additional issue of who makes decisions when trade-offs need to be made. If NGO advocacy is planned in isolation these trade-offs may not be recognised or given priority: *de facto* it is likely to be the tactics of the larger, better resourced, and better linked organisations that win out. There is a need to recognise political dynamics within and between civil society groups, and work to ensure systems to enable transparency and participatory decision making.

² UNFPA, no date.

³ Schuler, 1992.

⁴ Jane Covey, 1994.

Incorporating other dimensions of success, and being clear about what they are and possible trade-offs, allows a more complete analysis and understanding of a campaign's effectiveness and potential for long-term impact. Table 1 draws together four possible dimensions of success in advocacy work. It is not suggested that these have equal weighting in every situation or for every type of issue. However for most advocacy issues a number of these will be important.

Each of these dimensions of success is complex in itself and may require different methods for monitoring and evaluating change. However it is important that these dimensions are not seen in isolation of each other as success in one dimension can influence progress in another.

1. Policy change

Policy advocacy is the process in which a group or groups apply a set of skills and techniques for the purpose of *influencing* public decision making. It refers not only to laws, but also to the creation of programmes, allocation of resources, allocation of staff, and implementation. Policy advocacy may be carried out by a range of groups depending on the issue. For particularly technical issues, for example around TRIPS, there may be a key role here for more formal and professional advocacy.

The policy results for advocacy are the degree to which policy objectives are achieved. Such objectives involve specific changes in the *policies, programmes, or practices* of major national institutions that affect the public, such as government, parliament, the media, the private sector, programmes of local donors, or UN bodies.

2. Strengthening civil society

The results in this dimension refer to the increased advocacy capacity of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) to hold those in power accountable, also the increased capacity of CSOs to work together in advocacy networks at the local, national, and international level, and the increased advocacy capacity of these networks. Issues of transparency, participation, and power within advocacy networks are very relevant here.

A good example of success in this dimension is the International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN) which has linked and supported advocacy groups in many countries around the breastfeeding issue.

Another important aspect of strengthening civil society involves increasing 'social capital' – the relations of trust and reciprocity that underpin the cooperation and collaboration necessary for advocacy and for working collectively.

3. Supporting people centred policy making

People centred policy making is a process by which the community becomes aware of its rights and develops the confidence, skills, and organisation to speak out to

Table 1 Framework for understanding possible outcomes and impact of advocacy and campaigning work⁵

Dimension of work	Intermediate objectives	Longer-term objectives
1. Policy change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased dialogue on an issue • Raised profile of issue • Changed opinion (whose?) • Changed rhetoric (in public/private) • Change in written publications 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changed policy • Change in legislation • Change in resource allocation • Policy/legislation change implemented (<i>and in the very long term</i>) • Positive change in people's lives as a result of the policy/legislation change
2. Strengthening civil society by working with individual organisations and networks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change in individual members' skills, capacity, knowledge and effectiveness? • Change in individual civil groups' capacity, organisational skills, effectiveness? • Greater synergy of aims/activities in networks/movements • Change in collaboration, trust or unity of civil society groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased effectiveness of civil society work • Civil groups active in influencing decision makers in ways that will benefit poor people • Civil groups monitoring implementation of policies/programmes. • Partnerships and networks effective and sustainable
3. Supporting people-centred policy making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater awareness of individual rights and the power systems that withhold rights • Change in local people's skills, capacity, and knowledge to mobilise and advocate on their own behalves • Increased reporting of right violations • Existence of systems to monitor rights • Claims made by CBOs for enforcing rights 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved access to basic rights such as health, housing, water, food, non-discrimination
4. Enlarging democratic space or the space in which civil society groups can effectively operate in society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater freedom of expression • Greater acceptance/recognition of civil groups • Existence of fora for civil groups to input into a wider range of decisions • Increased legitimacy of civil society groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased participation of civil society groups in influencing decisions • Change in accountability and transparency of public institutions

demand or negotiate them. This work emphasises results related to the role of individuals as political actors and claim-holders, especially results related to political awareness, situation analysis and a sense of personal self-worth. Such changes occur when the passive and paralysing attitudes of self-blame and ignorance, so common to many powerless and disenfranchised groups, are transformed into proactive attitudes and concrete capabilities that allow people to become active protagonists in the defence and advancement of their own rights.

This dimension overlaps with the previous one when looking at increasing the capacity of membership based organisations.

An example of this sort of work would be support given to groups of *dalits* (untouchables) in Nepal who are challenging local level discrimination by a variety of mass activities including entering temples where they are barred from access.

4. Enlarging the space in which civil society groups can effectively operate in society

This dimension looks at whether the effort has increased the access and influence of disenfranchised groups such

as women in debates and decision making, or strengthened the accountability of state institutions to civil society groups. In many cases when governments or multilaterals wish to engage in discussions with civil society, they turn to large international organisations such as ActionAid which are perceived to have relevant expertise. In the process there is a danger that local, smaller or poorer organisations are squeezed out of opportunities for debate. In a number of countries ActionAid has been invited to participate in developing PRSPs. Instead of taking this as an opportunity to represent civil society in the process, ActionAid has used this as an opportunity to get a whole range of civil society organisations together to develop a common position and together feed into the process, thereby giving smaller grassroots organisations an opportunity to get involved.

Concluding remarks

This paper has focused on only two aspects of monitoring and evaluating advocacy work – why it is challenging and the need to focus on different dimensions of success. There are many other aspects that need attention. In particular the Scoping Study on which this paper is based

⁵ Developed by Ros David from IDR, 1999.

found that more work is needed on: networks and movements; how to ensure that advocacy work at different levels is complementary; how to understand the value of individual contributions without weakening cooperation; how to best support civil society advocacy in the longer term; social capital; the political consequences of advocacy; how to recognise and monitor space for involvement at different levels and in different cultures; and how to fully incorporate gender issues. These are issues that ActionAid intends to look at in more detail over the next three years through the action research mentioned earlier.

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Notes

This paper is based on a longer paper: *Monitoring and Evaluating Advocacy: A Scoping Study*, 2001, by Jennifer Chapman and Amboka Wameyo. The Scoping Study is available from ActionAid.

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