

SUSTAINABLE DIETS FOR ALL

REFLECTIONS
SERIES

Strengthening
capacity for
advocacy in
food systems
of the poor



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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

CSO	Civil society organisation
D&D	Dialogue and Dissent
INGO	International non-governmental organisation
KRC	Kabarole Research and Resource Centre (Uganda)
MAI	Multi-actor initiative
M&E	Monitoring and evaluation
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
SD4All	Sustainable Diets for All

SUMMARY

Effective and progressive civil society movements are critical for tackling poverty and protecting the environment in low-income countries. Strengthening the capacity of citizens and advocacy organisations can therefore be a meaningful contribution to local, national and international efforts to shape development sector policy. However, agency is rarely talked about in relation to capacity strengthening. The definition of capacity strengthening used in advocacy programmes tends to focus on strengthening skills and knowledge, whereas agency is about fostering independent action and free choices.

In this paper we highlight lessons and insights from Sustainable Diets for All (SD4All), an advocacy programme that focuses on capacity strengthening and agency in its aim to foster change within local and national food systems. Spanning Bolivia, Indonesia, Kenya, Uganda and Zambia, our experiences from SD4All highlight the dilemmas and tensions that Northern funders and Southern CSOs face when seeking common cause in advocacy agendas – particularly when the changes sought should be grounded in citizen agency.

The paper places capacity strengthening within the context of a development sector where most advocacy is funded and managed by Northern stakeholders. These actors often have their own advocacy agendas to prioritise. And while stakeholders funding advocacy try to align with the needs and interests of Southern civil society organisations (CSOs) and citizens, our experience is that much gets lost in the detail.

Based on lessons from SD4All and our reflections on advocacy capacity strengthening and agency, this report makes four key recommendations for donors, international non-governmental organisations, civil society organisations and citizen groups.

1. Invest in agency within capacity strengthening programmes

Establish a shared understanding of agency at the outset of a project that explores the link between agency and capacity strengthening. Ensure that capacity assessment tools and strengthening activities are tailored to individual organisations, their environments and needs, and recognise existing skills and knowledge.

2. Recognise and value different types of knowledge

Value the knowledge of Southern CSOs, researchers and citizens in policy influencing and advocacy at local, national, and international levels. Move away from differentiating between ‘experts’ and ‘Southern voices’.

3. Recognise the importance of equality in relationships

Be upfront about how structural inequalities impact on CSO capacity at the start of a programme. Create space for uncomfortable conversations about power imbalances within initiatives and be prepared to challenge preconceived notions about who holds knowledge and who should convene capacity strengthening activities.

4. Prioritise capacity strengthening as a joint endeavour

Promote horizontal rather than vertical approaches to collective capacity strengthening, and create opportunities for tacit knowledge to be shared. Foster an approach to capacity strengthening and learning as a two-way enterprise.

1. INTRODUCTION

Capacity strengthening is an important and longstanding development approach used in sustainable development advocacy. It works on the premise that strengthening the technical and operational capacity of organisations, institutions, networks and individuals is necessary if local, national and international advocacy goals are to be reached. Donors and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) are particularly interested in capacity strengthening because it is seen as an approach based on localisation and Southern ownership, and as such is likely to deliver more durable policy outcomes.

The notion of ‘citizen agency’ has become important for thinking about capacity, advocacy and sustainable development, particularly with regards to food systems. Agency refers to the capacity of people to act independently and to make their own free choices. It covers both the individual and the collective capacity of people to be agents of their lives and of their development (Vorley et al., 2019). Catalysing citizen agency as part of the change process is particularly important when it comes to the policies that govern the food systems of low-income communities and countries.

The food systems that feed and provide a livelihood for many low-income citizens around the world tend to be ignored by policy, if not actively criticised. Misplaced assumptions about the priorities of people on low incomes and their knowledge around food can lead to ineffective and sometimes harmful policymaking. Involving formal and informal food system actors in processes of change is therefore essential to avoid misdirected food policy interventions grounded in the assumptions of outsiders. The knowledge and experience of citizens that make low-income food systems a dynamic source of often healthy, nutritious food can potentially direct policy interventions towards more inclusive, equitable and durable development.

Food systems change that is largely defined and shaped by food producers, informal marketeers, and low-income consumers, and delivered alongside civil society organisations (CSOs) aligned with citizen agendas can be powerful. Underpinning CSO advocacy with the principle of citizen agency recognises the fact that meaningful social, political and economic change often emerges because of powerful community-based action from citizens.

When this combined citizen- and CSO-driven change is delivered through a policy process facilitated or adopted by government, it has the potential to create the kind of lasting and effective policy needed to achieve sustainable development. However, for this approach to be effective citizens must have agency to define change; they also need civil society and government stakeholders who have their own agency to listen, respond to and prioritise citizens’ needs within the policymaking process.

This paper reflects on the linkages between advocacy capacity strengthening and the concept of citizen agency. We consider if and how international organisations, donors and CSOs can leverage the interplay between agency and capacity strengthening approaches to support the advocacy work of citizens.

The paper is divided into three parts. First, it discusses advocacy capacity strengthening, touching on its history and considering if or how ideas of agency can shape its future. Second, it shares broad learnings and three case studies from Sustainable Diets for All (SD4All, a programme jointly run by Hivos and IIED), that highlight the potential value of combining agency and advocacy capacity strengthening approaches. Finally, it reflects on the benefits and challenges of capacity strengthening and agency approaches to advocacy when influencing food systems of the poor.

Box 1: What are food systems of the poor?

Food systems refer to all of the actors, processes and flows which link food production, processing, trade, consumption and waste, as well as policy and governance. In this paper we use the term ‘food systems of the poor’ to refer to the systems that low-income citizens rely on around the world for both food and livelihoods. These food systems operate largely through the informal and semi-formal economy without large-scale corporate structures. For these reasons, they tend to be neglected by policymakers. There is often mutual distrust between informal food system actors and their governments.

2. CAPACITY STRENGTHENING IN SUSTAINABLE DIETS FOR ALL

SD4All is one of four initiatives supported under the Dialogue and Dissent (D&D) framework, funded by the Dutch government. Instituted in 2014 by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and funded from the beginning of 2016 to the end of 2020, the D&D initiative has capacity strengthening at its core. Its objective is to drive changes in policy, structures, and processes – and ultimately people’s lives – through increasing the capacity of civil society to lobby and advocate around priorities defined by citizens within their constituencies. At a time when civic space is shrinking in many countries, the D&D programme aims to strengthen the political role of CSOs in their struggles against poverty, injustice and insecurity. It also recognises the important role citizens can play in driving localisation and southern ownership agendas.

SD4All is a five-year programme that aims to strengthen the capacity of CSOs and citizens to better equip them to deliver change within local and national food systems. The programme’s focal countries are Bolivia, Indonesia, Kenya,

Uganda, and Zambia. ‘For all’ is a critical part of the SD4All programme as it speaks to the need to ensure all low-income communities have sufficient access to sustainable and healthy diets.

Working with CSO partners and citizen groups, SD4All aims to influence the policies and practices of governments, market actors and international institutions. Three focal areas for advocacy define the programme’s work: food production, food consumption and urban-rural market linkages, with intersecting issues of gender and climate change cutting across these areas. Tools such as an ‘advocacy toolkit’ (de Toma, 2018) and citizen-generated evidence were used to strengthen capacity and increase the effectiveness of policy-directed actions. A substantial amount of programme resources was directed towards CSO capacity strengthening and catalysing citizen agency, and this strengthened advocacy capacity was instrumental in the programme’s success in delivering policy change.

3. ADVOCACY CAPACITY STRENGTHENING

The definition of capacity strengthening often used in advocacy programmes centres on facilitating the development of skills, knowledge and abilities to achieve agreed advocacy outcomes. This can include improving skills needed to analyse policy contexts, identifying what change needs to happen and how, and increasing knowledge on a particular policy area, including how to generate and use evidence in a policy space.

Capacity strengthening approaches were initially integrated into development practice as a way of responding to criticism of the sector in its early years, as poverty in low-income countries persisted despite ongoing development and aid efforts. Critiques included but were not limited to: a lack of sustainability of development outcomes, the use of one-size-fits-all approaches and lack of ownership of development processes by nation states, civil society actors and citizens (Berg, 1993).

The systematic adoption of capacity strengthening in global development practice contributed to the sector's commitment to two things: Southern ownership; and partnership models that better link donors with the people intended to benefit from local and national development outcomes. Processes such as the 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness and the Accra Agenda for Action were significant landmarks that cemented the role of capacity strengthening in a development sector characterised by interventionist approaches, and limited by the unfair and imbalanced nature of the wider aid system.

Capacity 'strengthening' was not initially a goal of development programming. At first, development practitioners focused on capacity 'building' and then on 'development'. 'Building capacity' infers that there is very little already in place in terms of knowledge, skills,

abilities and resources. It is rooted in the misguided and harmful idea that citizens, civil society and governments in the global South do not have the foundations and building blocks needed to drive and shape their own development. By contrast, 'development' and 'strengthening' both recognise that the capacity to lead and direct processes of development in the global South always exist in different ways and to different degrees.

As an outlier in global development programming, it is no surprise that capacity strengthening to improve the effectiveness of advocacy emerged at the tail end of the sector's wider transition towards Southern ownership and localisation of development. The Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs' D&D framework is one example of an initiative that centres around capacity strengthening.

It would be convenient to think that advocates of capacity strengthening have avoided earlier misconceptions that capacity should or could be built with ideas, designs and approaches imposed from the outside. However, advocacy capacity strengthening delivered by international organisations can all too often result in lobbying that is indirectly or directly tied to the advocacy priorities of the INGO or donor funding the work.

When advocacy capacity strengthening is underpinned by the idea of citizen agency, one starts from the premise that reasonable, and often significant, capacity for advocacy already exists. Citizens calling for better policy and practice around food systems often have in-depth knowledge of the issues that need to be addressed and how to do this, but have unmet needs in other capacity areas such as political access – especially at international levels – and access to funding and programme planning, reporting and monitoring.



Two women sell fruit juice in La Paz, Bolivia by Mauricio Panozo of Lucano Photography © Hivos

An agency approach to advocacy capacity strengthening points to ways of working that prioritise the ability of citizens to make their own choices about the nature and direction of change – a critical element of localisation and Southern ownership agendas. It also recognises that for citizen agency to be realised there must be an effective social contract between citizens and the CSOs and

governments that represent them. It is therefore a broad concept which acknowledges the importance of citizen, CSO and government agency and the significant knowledge these groups collectively bring to the table. It acts as a reminder that local and national knowledge is critical when unpicking the complexity of food system change.

4. LEARNING FROM

SD4ALL

The initial vision for capacity strengthening within the SD4All programme was anchored in a commitment to the agency of citizens. The importance of the agency of CSOs emerged later. Much of the capacity strengthening was initially traditional in its approach, and it aligned with agency over time and through intentional debate.

An external evaluation of SD4All capacity strengthening identified several positive outcomes including: improved knowledge and skills in food systems lobbying and advocacy planning and delivery, including strengthening of CSO engagement in policy dialogues with government. It also found that the programme led to stronger influencing and functioning of coalitions working on dietary diversity, and a deeper understanding of the concept of citizen agency among CSOs and citizen groups and support for its operationalisation. Significantly, evaluators identified capacity strengthening as one of the most important and enduring achievements of SD4All.

Planning capacity strengthening

CSO capacity strengthening started with an organisational self-assessment framework that asked organisations to reflect on five ‘abilities’: to act and commit; to deliver on objectives; to adapt and self-renew; to relate to external stakeholders; and to achieve coherence. The citizen and CSO initiatives supported by the programme differed widely in terms of mandates, ways of working and organisational maturity, and as a result a one-size-fits-all approach to self-assessment did not suit all of the groups the programme worked with. To address this challenge, in several countries the self-assessment tool was complemented or replaced by a series of annual reflection and planning meetings that reviewed capacity in a bespoke way, alongside advocacy planning processes.

Box 2: Examples of policy changes achieved by CSOs

Civil society partners succeeded in raising awareness of the complexity of issues in sustainable food systems in urban and rural areas. They influenced agricultural sector development plans, legal instruments and strategies, which resulted in increased government resources to support diversification of food production. Lobbying and advocacy in these areas were particularly effective in Zambia and Uganda at national and local levels, and in Indonesia at the local level (IIED/Hivos, 2020).

In Zambia, collective efforts by the Civil Society for Poverty Reduction (CSPR) and the Scaling Up Nutrition CSO Alliance (CSO SUN) led to the co-creation of a national crop diversification strategy with government (Mwanamwenge and Cook, 2019). In Uganda, the Food Rights Alliance, Slow Food Uganda and small groups driven by citizen champions contributed to the inclusion

of recommendations on sustainable diets in a Production and Environmental Ordinance for Kabarole district. Lobbying also led to the tabling of a district-level resolution to limit sugarcane monocropping in Buikwe district. It is significant that CSO partners achieved these policy changes in countries with high levels of cereal monocropping (maize in Zambia and sugarcane in Uganda).

In Indonesia, advocacy by Tanoker promoted a move away from ultra-processed food towards the consumption of indigenous foods, particularly among children. In Uganda, Zambia and Bolivia, CSO partners worked with food producers to start breaking down longstanding negative perceptions about indigenous foods that contribute to limited food and crop diversity.

Box 3: Improving capacity strengthening self-assessment

These learnings came from an internal reflection meeting from the Dialogue and Dissent consortium.

1. **Organise open dialogues:** rather than asking partners to fill in assessment forms such as questionnaires, organise open dialogues with partners based around the assessment questions. These discussions can be facilitated or bilateral between partners and funders or implementers.
2. **Focus on intended change:** use intended change objectives as a framework for needs assessments. Assess capacity needs by asking strategic questions linking intended change areas to capacity needs. Use self-assessment forms at the last stage of this process to check the quality of the discussions.

Implementing capacity strengthening

Capacity strengthening of CSO partners was initially facilitated largely by the programme implementers (IIED and HIVOS). As the idea of CSOs as intermediaries took root, those CSOs were then responsible for facilitating capacity strengthening with citizen groups. Capacity strengthening activities were delivered in several different languages and the evidence and advocacy products were translated. In Uganda, capacity strengthening initiatives with citizens were organised in a few local languages: Rutooro in Fort Portal, Acholi in Gulu and Luganda in Buikwe. In Zambia, citizen sessions were held in Nyanga, a Bantu language; in Indonesia, the working language for the programme was Bahasa; and in Bolivia it was Spanish. Yet, English was still the main language of the programme and this presented an interesting challenge.

Words that were central to the programme's core concepts – advocacy and agency – did not translate well into the languages used by citizens in the SD4All project locations. This raised an interesting question about the effectiveness of English in defining development concepts and practice.

When combined, the above ways of working created rather vertical processes based on the idea of implementers as conveners and holders of knowledge and skills, that were in turn passed onto CSOs and citizen groups. As such, the SD4All capacity strengthening framework sat somewhere between the programme's citizen agency principles on the one hand, and a vertical approach to advocacy capacity strengthening on the other. However, over time the programme adopted more horizontal approaches. CSOs became clearly positioned as intermediaries between implementers and citizens, and the agency of both citizens and CSO partners were prioritised. 'Learning by doing' and peer learning approaches to capacity strengthening were prioritised as ways of working.

Learning from others and learning by doing proved to be particularly useful for applying formal and conceptual knowledge on citizen agency. Knowledge of this type is difficult to transfer to others through writing, training or teaching. It often requires tacit knowledge that relies on intuition and builds with experience.

An overview of activities

The table below highlights the capacity strengthening activities that were delivered during the five years of the SD4All programme. It includes training on programme design, monitoring and evaluation using theories of change and outcome harvesting processes. Institutional capacity strengthening activities on administration, finance and fundraising were also delivered. Significant funding was made available to create advocacy products such as videos, reports, infographics and exhibitions. Workshops were delivered on gender mainstreaming and working with the media.

In the following section we present three case studies of activities which were highlighted in the SD4All external evaluation because of their success in strengthening advocacy capacity of individuals and organisations. Each case also played a pivotal role in deepening SD4All and the wider D&D's collective insight into the role agency can play in advancing capacity strengthening practice.



A girl prepares food at a community event in Fort Portal, Uganda © Joseph Mhza

Approach	Activity highlights
Advocacy toolkit and learning programme	An advocacy toolkit was developed, which was critical in embedding citizen agency within SD4All. It was followed by an advocacy learning programme that used mentoring to support the continued use of relevant parts of the toolkit and consolidated the citizen agency approach to advocacy across the programme.
Institutional capacity strengthening	Capacity strengthening to increase institutional effectiveness included outcome harvesting, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) for advocacy, financial planning (budgeting) and reporting, fundraising and gender mainstreaming.
Research generation and usage	CSOs worked with researchers using a learning by doing approach to strengthen capacity around generating and using research. Learning about the role of citizen-generated research when engaging with and influencing small business actors, local government, households and local leaders was particularly useful.
Coalition and network building	Workshops were delivered to support CSOs to create multi-actor initiatives (MAI). These MAIs were characterised by their inclusion of citizens: food producers, consumers and informal market actors came together to identify change agendas and to interact with and influence decision makers.
Generation and use of communications products and channels	A series of communications products was developed for SD4All, inspired by the principle of CSO and citizen agency. A learning by doing approach and training were both used to strengthen communications capacity. The products included a series of four videos and digital and print photo exhibitions that showcased CSO and citizen voices. The programme also ran a youth competition focused on journalism on sustainable diets.
Exchange visits and peer-to-peer learning	Exchange visits and exposure to international events and workshops offered peer-to-peer learning. South-South exchanges facilitated horizontal learning between partners on issues such as how to work with the informal food sector and establishing city food councils (Uganda and Zambia) (IIED/Hivos, 2020). Peer-to-peer learning between IIED and HIVOS on the importance of agency in programme implementation was also invaluable.

Case study 1: The advocacy toolkit

The advocacy toolkit was developed to bridge a gap in representation and voice to enable advocacy engagement and leadership of citizens within SD4All (Vorley et al., 2020). Its objectives were to: strengthen the capacity of CSOs to grasp the concept of citizen agency and the role it plays in advocacy within food systems of the poor; to assess if and how CSOs systematically work with citizens to define and deliver advocacy initiatives; and to strengthen the ability of CSOs to co-create advocacy initiatives with citizen groups.

The toolkit was rolled out in two phases. An international ‘train-the-trainer’ session was delivered with all staff in Bolivia, the Netherlands, Indonesia, Uganda, the UK, and Zambia (this was before Kenya joined the programme). This was followed by a series of national workshops where the toolkit was shared and discussed with CSO partners and citizen groups. The train-the-trainer session set out the programme’s collective understanding of citizen agency for the first time. The role citizen agency could play in connecting people – farmers, informal marketeers, and consumers – to policymakers was explored, alongside the programme’s renewed focus on CSOs as intermediaries in this process.

Workshops in Bolivia, Indonesia, Uganda and Zambia

The advocacy workshops with partners took place towards the end of the programme’s second year. The workshops facilitated group exercises and discussion on advocacy, citizen agency and CSOs as intermediaries in citizen advocacy. The exercises and discussions challenged a common assumption that CSOs in low-income countries naturally represent the interests of the citizens in their constituencies.

As partners used the toolkit they explored if and how their agendas and actions aligned with the advocacy interests and priorities of the citizens on whose behalf they wanted, or were mandated, to speak. As a result, many partners recognised that there was more to be done to authentically catalyse community-based action on local food system issues.

During the course of the workshops, implementers and CSOs faced the inconvenient truth that many CSO partners adopted the advocacy priorities of the international federations they were part of, and in the case of SD4All, the advocacy priorities of their funders, rather than championing the changes identified by citizen groups (Vorley et al., 2020).

In follow-up meetings CSO partners discussed the challenges raised and explored how SD4All priorities could be better embedded in the existing internal plans and strategies of CSOs, by identifying workstreams that could align with citizen agendas. During these discussions it became clear that it might be difficult to fulfil the programme’s commitment to agency given the programme’s structure, which gave the implementers power because of their role as funders, ‘thought leaders’ and programme managers.

The advocacy toolkit was followed up with a learning programme, delivered in Uganda and Zambia to a group of six CSOs and HIVOS staff members, to continue the work of operationalising citizen engagement in ongoing advocacy agendas. Using one-to-one coaching the advocacy learning programme supported citizen-led advocacy among partners and promoted continued learning through use of the toolkit.

Lessons for Hivos and IIED

The process of designing and delivering the toolkit played a crucial role in internalising the concept of citizen agency within the project and recognising the importance of CSO agency, as well as citizen agency. While exploring agency within SD4All centred on finding *common cause* with citizen groups, our experience showed that finding common cause with our CSO partners was, in some countries, equally important and challenging.

The contradiction inherent in trying to facilitate and catalyse agency, while also holding a powerful leadership position, raised dilemmas. How can autonomy in advocacy be encouraged if partners are understandably keen to align with outside interests because of the funding and contractual pressures they face?



Woman food vendor participates in food systems workshop in El Alto, Bolivia © Veronica Leyton

Case study 2: The Bolivian food systems consortium

Advocacy is often most effective when undertaken by a range of actors. While many CSO partners worked closely towards similar or common local and national policy change goals, in Bolivia a consortium was established to work collectively on food systems change over the course of the five-year programme.

Establishing consortia, networks or social movements for change is a common advocacy approach in Bolivia and more broadly across South America. The SD4All programme's linking of capacity strengthening and agency enriched this tradition. The Bolivian team leading on capacity strengthening with CSOs achieved this by focusing specifically on capacity strengthening of CSOs as institutions and on their collective power as CSOs working within multi-actor initiatives (MAIs). A central part of their approach recognised and harnessed the value of relational learning, providing the space for people to come together as equals, open to recognising the contribution each person brings.

The organisations in the Bolivian SD4All consortium – MIGA, Fundación Alternativas, and La Casa de les Ningunes – saw themselves as groups of citizen actors who had already come together, independently of the programme, to advocate for

change. Each organisation had different work priorities and different but complementary abilities. They also had their own significant relationships with government departments, civil society, activist groups and the gastronomy sector. Capacity strengthening took place in the largely urban and affluent part of Bolivia's capital La Paz, and its corresponding food system. It focused on the unique characteristics of each CSO partner and identified needs using advocacy outcomes to guide the work.

Institutional capacity strengthening

The SD4All evaluation found that the capacity of the Bolivian CSOs within the consortium grew in several ways. Collectively and individually, their ability to influence other actors and to set public policy agendas increased. Among the younger CSO partners, financial and operational systems improved and experience of generating and using research, in particular citizen-generated evidence, increased.

The institutional capacity strengthening supported the development of CSO partners, but also led to the creation of an urban food systems consortium, largely because of the unique nature of the CSOs and their commitment to collective agency.

Citizen agency and the importance of ‘for all’

Over time, capacity strengthening on the concept of citizen agency led the Bolivian partners to recognise that they needed to include the agendas of citizens who worked in the food systems of the poor. Thus, the consortium shifted its focus from largely influencing middle-income consumers and the food systems they used. As a result, the Bolivian consortium opened up spaces where low-income women cooks in La Paz could have a voice and representation to define the food system issues that were most important to them. This led the coalition to extend its work on improving urban food security to include the promotion of heritage Andean grains. It also established a dialogue with low-income consumers and marketeers to understand how low-income consumers could better access sustainable foods from vendors. Through the process of developing projects together, CSOs and citizens became more than the sum of their individual parts. The Bolivian urban food systems consortium now has a broad appreciation of food heritage in both low- and middle-income, rural and urban segments of the population.

Case Study 3: Use of evidence for advocacy

Evidence can be a powerful tool for policy or practice change, particularly if generated by citizens. Collecting and deploying evidence is a critical part of CSOs’ work in engaging with and influencing stakeholders, including policymakers. However, evidence generation is a time-consuming and expensive activity that requires specialist knowledge. In this section we draw from SD4All’s experience of using evidence based on food diaries to illustrate the value and challenges of strengthening the capacities of CSOs in evidence generation and use.

The Kabarole Research and Resource Centre (KRC), a SD4All civil society partner in Western Uganda, developed the food diaries methodology as a tool to better understand local diets. KRC is experienced in conducting research and has strong ties to communities in their region. They

first used food diaries in 2015 when they worked with 200 people in Kabarole district to understand dietary patterns at a household level (Vorley and Boerwinkel, 2016). KRC asked study participants, including women from an ‘orugali’ group, to keep records of their own meals, involving them in the evidence-generation process in a meaningful way. Orugali is a movement promoting indigenous and traditional diets. Women in this group were then active in reaching out to neighbours and family members to influence their dietary choices. By helping the women track details of their diets, KRC supported them to become more aware of what they eat and why, and to influence food choices in their household and community, and in particular to increase consumption of indigenous Ugandan foods.

KRC’s capacity strengthening focus within the SD4All programme was on replicating their earlier food diaries study on a larger scale and using the findings for advocacy rather than community behaviour change. The SD4All study involved almost 400 participants from rural and urban areas. KRC recruited and trained participating households and collected good quality data. KRC’s staff worked closely with IIED to build their experience of analysing and writing up the data for use in engaging district and national government stakeholders in discussions about food systems and sustainable diets (Mohammed et al., 2020).

The food diary methodology was also used by CSO partner Tanoker in East Java, Indonesia. Tanoker had limited experience of evidence generation; their capacity strengthening was focused on better understanding how to plan and implement research. Working in partnership with IIED and Jember University, Tanoker gained experience of working with self-reported food diaries. Women in Tanoker’s community networks were recruited to track their consumption over time and in detail (Mayer et al., 2019). The information was used largely to influence consumption in other communities and to lobby local leaders focused on child health and nutrition.



Kabarole Research Centre run a food lab to discuss impacts of COVID-19 on food vendors in Fort Portal, Western Uganda
© Kabarole Research and Resource Centre

In both Indonesia and Uganda SD4All partners brought a citizen science agenda to food systems advocacy, successfully training and involving local communities in generating research data. CSOs also had the opportunity to gather information from a large sample and share their perspectives on the data gathered. However, the data was so rich and nuanced that the process of cleaning, organising, and analysing it was much more complex than expected. While both CSOs gained a picture of people's diets that was grounded in their lived experience, identifying how to best use that data was challenging. It is not clear if the detailed information about diets when targeted to policymakers has made a significant difference to policy outcomes (Mohammed et al., 2020).

Despite challenges, the CSOs involved in the food diary process learned some valuable lessons. Evidence generation by civil society partners is time consuming, even with substantial technical knowledge and research support. The participation of citizens in evidence generation can be relatively easy but involving citizens in other parts of the research process, especially in the use of data to influence policymakers, is harder. The amount of external support needed to organise and analyse data raised questions about the extent to which complex evidence-generating fitted with the mission of CSOs that do not focus on research.

5. REFLECTIONS

Below we offer some reflections on the successes and challenges of advocacy capacity strengthening within SD4All and the facilitation of citizen agency. We will also consider the relationship between the two as we ask: are these ways of working distinctive? Or are they complementary means to a common end? We hope that these reflections can inform future work on capacity strengthening, particularly in food policy and advocacy.

Successes and challenges of agency and capacity strengthening approaches

The SD4All programme started out working on capacity strengthening in its more traditional form, and then moved towards supporting the growth of advocacy organisations and their staff through the promotion of citizen and CSO agency. Through this experience we can take stock of the respective strengths and weaknesses of each approach and the impact that they had on the SD4All programme.

Citizen agency approach

The promotion of citizen agency in SD4All highlighted the importance of grounding the advocacy planning process in the change priorities of citizens and their immediate needs. When working on food system change it is essential to recognise and champion the advocacy priorities of citizens who hold detailed knowledge of the changes needed at local and national levels. The agency approach creates incentives and increased opportunities for CSOs to uncover and highlight the valuable knowledge held by food system actors such as producers, informal marketeers and consumers.

Citizen engagement requires CSOs to be intermediaries between INGOs and citizens – facilitating access to political space as well as knowledge (Narayanaswamy, 2015). Aligning with citizen groups is particularly useful for CSOs working within the informal food economy. The CSOs that found common cause with citizen agendas and worked towards the co-creation of advocacy priorities increased their credibility, as well as their ability to promote more durable and appropriate policy recommendations. When aligned with strong citizen agendas, particularly those linked to changes in the informal food system, CSOs can move from mirroring western advocacy approaches and strategies to deploying approaches based on cultural norms that are known to work more effectively within their local settings.

However, the citizen agency approach has its limitations as a standalone means of increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of CSO advocacy. While it was critical for ensuring the right issues were brought to the policymaking table, it played a lesser role in supporting CSOs in negotiating change with decision makers.

Capacity strengthening approach

To be successful, lobbying within local, national and international policy processes and spaces needs resources and these resources need to be targeted appropriately – for example, towards generating and using evidence, and tailoring and packaging messages. Traditional capacity strengthening that focuses on these resource-heavy parts of the advocacy planning cycle are particularly useful in supporting CSOs to engage in impactful discussions with government officials.

Traditional capacity strengthening has a particular role to play in the generation of evidence and the sharing of information. Advocacy is a professional activity and so it is important to present citizens' knowledge in the professional formats familiar within policymaking spaces. However, gathering, analysing and presenting knowledge in this way requires significant resources, which CSOs and citizen groups often lack. The provision of budgets to create products such as reports, briefings, videos, infographics and blogs is a central part of capacity strengthening in this area.

For young CSOs and newly organised citizen groups, institutional capacity strengthening is also a critical part of increasing efficiency and effectiveness as advocates. For smaller CSOs and citizen groups, such as associations of informal marketeers, gaining access to advocacy funds, experience of managing and reporting on those funds, and securing future funds are all critical and are areas where traditional capacity strengthening is of real importance.

Like a standalone citizen agency approach, traditional advocacy capacity strengthening also has its limitations. We noted above the unintended and invisible pressures on CSOs to put external agendas at the centre of their advocacy, distancing them from their own priorities or those of citizens. Of equal concern is the way traditional advocacy capacity strengthening approaches can reinforce the erroneous idea that Southern CSOs and citizens do not



Woman harvests lettuce from a home garden in Zambia © Stan Makumba

have the knowledge and skills to define and lead change processes. This misconception can be robustly challenged through strong emphasis on agency.

The complementarity of agency and capacity strengthening approaches

The experience of delivering traditional capacity strengthening, when compared with supporting advocacy organisations by prioritising agency, raised several important questions around power, access to financial resources and how to truly understand capacity needs.

The routine lack of CSO agency and funding points to the limited power many CSOs have within the development and wider aid system that they operate in. Creating space and opportunity for CSOs to exercise agency in advocacy is critical and should be incorporated into capacity strengthening initiatives early on. Creating capacity self-assessment tools that can more sensitively identify capacity needs, and making clearer distinctions between resources, knowledge and skills would strengthen the self-assessment process.

Increasing programme capacity to monitor the effects that facilitating agency and capacity strengthening has on CSOs and citizen groups is also important for improving the quality of support that programmes such as SD4All provide.

Is capacity strengthening a deliverable or a shared endeavour?

Framing capacity strengthening as a development activity primarily delivered to CSOs in low-income countries, rather than as a shared endeavour between mainly Northern INGOs and Southern CSOs, needs to be challenged. This framing suggests that the responsibility for addressing the challenges

in improving development outcomes lies with Southern CSOs, whereas capacity strengthening as a shared endeavour points to a broader systemic challenge: one that will require action from stakeholders from the global North and South, and that recognises the imbalance of power and resources within the development and wider aid system.

Southern CSOs and citizen groups lobbying for food policy change within the confines of an unequal aid system are likely to benefit from increased access to funding, new skills and strengthened knowledge. But of equal importance is working with actors within the aid system to position CSOs as thought leaders and influential stakeholders that bring citizen agendas to the heart of defining and achieving sustainable development. If assumptions that Southern CSOs lack the skills and abilities needed to lead development persist, they will continue to be categorised as the ‘Southern’ or ‘local’ voice within an unequal aid system, in which CSOs are asked to talk about development from a narrow ‘Southern’ perspective, while Northern ‘experts’ routinely lead change.

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) often fail to see the systemic barriers to effective CSO and citizen-based advocacy, making it difficult for capacity strengthening work to get to the heart of the problems CSOs face. More needs to be understood by INGOs and CSOs about how to increase their agency. As the main holders of power and resources within the development sector, Northern INGOs and donors have an important role to play in pursuing an agency agenda. Strengthening the capacity of INGOs and donors to recognise and address systemic weaknesses within policymaking processes, including those shaped by the development and aid sector, is a critical first step.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Capacity strengthening has made inroads into improving development outcomes, including in food systems policy, but there is still more to be done. Based on our experiences and reflections we provide four recommendations aimed at INGOs, CSOs, donors and the broader development sector. We hope these recommendations will increase the potential of capacity strengthening initiatives – particularly in advocacy.

1. Invest in agency within capacity strengthening programmes

- At the inception of capacity strengthening projects discuss and define what agency means. Consider whether it is citizen or CSO agency (or both) that needs to be promoted. Once a shared vision for agency has been identified, create capacity strengthening plans centred on this collective understanding. Ensure plans include time and budget for reflection and learning loops to create space to review progress.
- Use broad self-assessment tools, combined with a context-specific tool to create capacity strengthening plans that are specific to a particular organisation and its environment. Ensure that tools have the capability to capture issues linked to agency such as the skills, knowledge and expertise already present within CSOs and citizen groups.

2. Recognise and value different types of knowledge

- Recognise the value of knowledge derived from the lived experiences of individuals and small groups, as well as knowledge based on research and large datasets. When designing advocacy initiatives, the knowledge of those most affected by policy issues must be at the forefront of planning. External knowledge from national or international experts should be brought in as needed.
- Time and funding are fundamental to strengthening CSO capacity to generate knowledge products in-house. The creation of mixed teams of researchers, citizens and CSOs can be an effective way of using limited resources. Persist in the face of challenges; capacity strengthening in this area is a long-term endeavour that needs to systematically include CSO and citizen perspectives and analysis in international development discourses.

3. Recognise the importance of equality in relationships

- At the outset of capacity strengthening initiatives acknowledge and discuss the ways that structural inequalities impact on CSO capacity. Discuss the unfair nature of the aid system that capacity strengthening sits within. Work collectively to identify any damaging ways of working, dependencies or social constructs such as race and gender that have the potential to undermine capacity strengthening activities.
- Create spaces for uncomfortable conversations about power. Examine the power dynamics between stakeholders within capacity strengthening initiatives and discuss how to mitigate power imbalances. South-North partnerships must be equal, authentic and sustainable for meaningful capacity strengthening to take place. Challenge ideas that promote programme funders and implementers as the keepers of knowledge, and carefully choose facilitators, conveners, and trainers so that capacity strengthening is not solely led by programme implementers.

4. Prioritise capacity strengthening as a joint endeavour

- Prioritise collective capacity strengthening by working through horizontal rather than vertical processes. Strengthen capacity of different but complementary and likeminded CSOs working on similar issues to create virtuous learning cycles within a wider group, network or coalition.
- Create capacity strengthening plans where learning is a two-way process that includes implementers and CSOs. Enable people to learn from each other and repeat capacity strengthening sessions over time to accommodate changes in personnel and to create space for new insights to be gathered. Identify ways to monitor and evaluate capacity strengthening as a joint endeavour.

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