

# Breaking down Barriers



Illustrations: Studio Nieuwhof

POLICY  
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## INGO roles and practices in advocacy programmes

# Maximising added value

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### Executive summary

This paper synthesises existing literature on the added value of INGOs in strengthening advocacy by local CSOs in the global South. It identifies eight enabling roles that INGOs can play: that of funder, capacity strengthener, protector, alliance builder, relationship broker, knowledge producer and broker, South-North connector and advocate. These roles challenge the idea that INGOs are merely a channel for (government) funding to local CSOs in the global South. At the same time, the review also shows that INGOs can pose significant constraints to advocacy performed by Southern CSOs. These constraints can result in the reduction or loss of a Southern CSOs' autonomy, local ownership and grassroots legitimacy, thus hindering the potential for effective advocacy for sustainable systemic change. To maximise their added value in advocacy programmes of their local partners, INGOs thus need to eliminate or minimise their constraining roles while simultaneously strengthening their enabling roles.

### Introduction

Ever since the 1980s, and despite ups and downs in appreciation and critique, International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) have been recognised as important development actors. For a large part this importance is linked to their work in the field of service delivery in such areas as the provision of education and health services to the poor, microcredit schemes to women, and drinking water and sanitation facilities to underserved areas. However, their service delivery role has been increasingly criticised for excusing the inaction of governments in these fields. More importantly, it has been criticised from the idea that service delivery interventions alone do not tackle the root causes of poverty processes and as such cannot achieve large-scale and sustainable social change. Therefore, to have greater and lasting impact, INGOs are (also) increasingly expected to engage in advocacy, which challenges the underlying power structures that perpetuate marginalisation. We define advocacy here as 'a wide range of activities conducted to influence decision makers at different levels'.

Most of the existing literature on INGOs and advocacy focuses on the roles they play within international campaigns. This literature assumes that INGOs are the primary driver of social and political

change. In contrast, this paper focuses on the enabling roles that INGOs can play in strengthening local advocacy efforts in the global South. Existing literature that examines the roles that INGOs play in advocacy is fragmented, with most studies focussing on a single role. This paper addresses this limitation by synthesising existing academic research on the topic, drawing upon the work of Elbers et al. (2018)<sup>2</sup> and Elbers & Kamstra (2020).<sup>3</sup>

This synthesis leads to eight distinctive roles which show the potential added value of these INGOs in advocacy (see Table 1). Section 2 briefly discusses each of these eight enabling roles. 'Potential' is the operative word here as each of these added values might turn into a drawback if not operated in line with principles of good donorship as context specificity and local ownership. The latter already points out, and literature confirms, that certain INGO practices actually constrain advocacy by Southern CSOs. Consequently, section 3 synthesises available evidence and discusses five practices through which INGOs can undermine advocacy (see Table 2). Overall, this paper addresses the following question: How can INGOs enable and constrain the advocacy undertaken by local CSOs in the global South? In our analysis, we focus specifically on INGOs that also act as donors towards local CSOs in the global South.

**INGOs as enablers**

**Funder**



With local funding for CSOs being limited in most developing countries and local funding for advocacy being practically non-existing, one of the important roles of INGOs in advocacy is that of funder. Although no surprise, it is less of an open door than it sounds with many of the (institutional) back donors of INGOs shying away from funding programmes with a political focus. INGO funding for advocacy then acts as a 'lifeblood' of Southern advocacy CSOs to continue the implementation and expansion of their activities. The added value of INGOs as funder might extend to local CSOs being perceived as 'fundable' by others. Funding then acts as a mark of legitimacy and organisational capacity, and as a sign of ability to manage donor grants and meet the onerous accountability requirements of donors.

**Capacity strengthener**



Doing advocacy requires specialised knowledge and skills; skills that local CSOs may lack. INGOs can play a key role in strengthening the capacity of Southern CSOs. Some specific capacities that local CSOs could need are their ability to produce evidence in order to enhance the credibility of their claims, to analyse the political arena in order to develop a clear stakeholder engagement strategy, and to produce tailored messages for an effective

communication strategy. Which capacities are relevant depends on contextual factors, the focus and tactics of advocacy interventions and whether advocacy is implemented alone or in coalitions. As with all capacity building interventions, tailor made and locally owned trajectories are called for.

**Protector**



Shrinking civic space has become a major impeding factor specifically for CSOs involved in political action. In some countries, the safety of advocates and activists has become a major concern certainly for those working in highly contentious areas such as LGBT+-rights or mining. INGOs can enable local advocacy by functioning as the local eyes and ears of the international community, and by taking an active political stance against human rights violations and speaking out to power holders. An INGO may afford Southern CSOs some protection, as local authorities would proceed more cautiously in order to avoid adverse publicity. Important as well is the actual protection of activists in terms of providing a safe house - a task often only possible for INGOs that have a local presence.

**Alliance builder**



Advocacy coalitions (e.g. the collaboration of different advocacy groups varying in size and focus) have a bigger chance of achieving success than individual organisations. Working collectively creates

Table 1. INGOs as enablers of advocacy

**Enabling roles**

Funder	INGOs provide funding to local CSOs which otherwise might not be available
Capacity strengthener	INGOs provide tailor made capacity support to local CSOs
Protector	INGOs provide a safe haven for local advocates
Alliance builder	INGOs bring diverse advocacy groups together for learning, coordination and collective action
Relationship broker	INGOs facilitate exchange between advocacy groups and power holders
Knowledge producer and broker	INGOs research, analyse and disseminate knowledge as a basis for advocacy
South North connector	INGOs connect local CSOs to audiences in the Global North and in international arenas
Advocate	INGOs advocate in either the Global South or North for certain laws, policies and practices

the potential to combine different skillsets, share crucial information, increase campaign visibility, mobilise larger groups, increase the scope of activities and reduce risks. In all these areas, INGOs can be of assistance - and often more so if they have a local presence and extensive knowledge of the local CSO community. They can thus coordinate coalitions, ensure synergy and strengthen solidarity among coalition members, provide them with spaces for shared analysis of problems and solutions, facilitate the sharing of information, help in reaching agreements on public and political positioning, and strengthen joint activities.

**Relationship broker**



Advocacy without access to those that you want to influence is a no-goer. One of the crucial success factors of any advocacy then is the credibility of the advocate if only because credibility opens doors and ears for the message of the CSO. INGOs may be considered more legitimate, knowledgeable, having a higher reputation or simply more neutral than their local partners. In circumstances where the lack of credibility of the local CSO stands in the way of advocacy success, INGOs can use their own credibility to bring together advocacy groups and power holders and facilitate exchange. At the same time, the credibility of INGOs may be crucial in enhancing the visibility and profile of the local CSOs.

**Knowledge producer and broker**



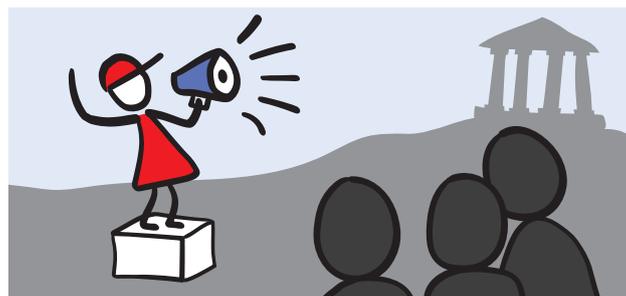
The importance of exchange of knowledge has been brought forward as a crucial area in which INGOs can play a role. Knowledge, however, also has to be gathered and analysed before it can be disseminated and used and also here INGOs may come in handy. Three types of knowledge are particularly useful. First, there is knowledge about the issue at stake. Besides making power holders more susceptible for influencing, a well-documented factual basis increases the chances of media coverage. Second, knowledge about the political arena and its key stakeholders is crucial. This includes knowledge about the positions of key stakeholders on an issue, relevant laws and treaties and the timing and procedures of decision-making. Third, knowledge about advocacy strategies that have already proven themselves in the past may be useful to design, replicate and upscale new advocacy programmes.

**South-North connector**



The same credibility that helps INGOs in connecting power holders and local CSOs might also be used to link local CSOs to audiences in the Global North and in international arenas. INGOs' ability to create linkages at all levels and across borders is often essential for advocacy success. The role of INGOs as South-North connector, and thus in amplifying the voice of Southern CSOs, is even more prominent as international networks are still being dominated by INGOs and these INGOs are seen as influential on state policies and international laws and treaties. There are ample examples where the linkages with Northern audiences can be highly beneficial to those undertaking advocacy in the Global South (e.g. child labour, labour rights, ecosystem preservation).

**Advocate**



Directly related to their added value of South-North connectors and to their perceived higher political power and influence, INGOs can be advocates themselves and push for certain laws, policies and practices. They might be 'used' by local CSOs which avoid dealing with their state directly and instead link up to international allies in order to pressure their states from outside. But they can also target Northern companies which might be sensitive to consumer pressure in their native countries. Or they may fight for the adoption of international norms (e.g. the interpretation and uptake of local norms upwards into the global arena), and they might be important in 'naming and shaming' states that violate norms and in monitoring and evaluating state compliance of those norms.

**Constraining practices**

In the literature, there has been considerable attention for INGO practices that unintentionally constrain the advocacy undertaken by local CSOs in the global South. We identify five key constraining practices:

**Table 2. INGOs as constrainters of advocacy**

**Constraining practices**

Top-down decision-making	INGOs undermine local ownership and constituency participation by dominating decision-making
Confining funding arrangements	INGOs undermine the long-term health, expertise and credibility of Southern CSOs by constraining funding practices
Managerial professionalisation	INGOs undermine grassroots legitimacy by promoting managerial professionalisation
Preference for 'professional' Southern CSOs	INGOs undermine advocacy by a preference for CSOs with weak grassroots ties and little mobilisation capacity
Rigid and linear approach to planning	INGOs undermine Southern CSOs' ability to adapt to on-going environmental changes by inflexible programming

**Top-down decision-making**

The control of funds by INGOs and the ensuing power imbalance means that INGOs have the ability to make decisions on key topics unilaterally and/or with limited influence from Southern CSOs. When preferences and interests of Southern CSOs deviate from those of INGOs, this becomes problematic. Typical problems include little CSO involvement in the design of advocacy programmes, for example, regarding the choice of goals, strategies or target groups. Such lack of influence can result in programme designs that do not necessarily match locally felt needs, priorities or realities, ultimately undermining local ownership. Top-down decision-making becomes particularly problematic when it undermines constituency participation and impedes Southern CSOs' grassroots relations and legitimacy.

**Confining funding arrangements**

Funding arrangements greatly impact the long-term health of Southern CSOs and their ability to work towards deep and lasting change. Many INGOs see a healthy civil society as a goal in itself, as CSOs can strengthen the voice of marginalised groups in holding governments and other power holders to account. Yet, funding practices are often not in line with this vision of civil society. Many INGOs work with short-term one-off funding arrangements with little room to cover overhead costs. A common issue amongst Southern CSOs is that they struggle to build and sustain their organisation. This includes difficulties in attracting and retaining quality staff and maintaining a long-term perspective. Particularly the latter is pivotal for building expertise and retaining credibility in the eyes of local stakeholders.

**Notes**

- 1 Willem Elbers is Principal Investigator of 'Breaking Down Barriers' at Radboud University (Netherlands). Lau Schulpen is lecturer and researcher at the Anthropology and Development Studies department at Radboud University (Netherlands).
- 2 Elbers, W., Frobisher, E., Kamau, P., Kumi, E., Saharan, T. & Schulpen, L. (2018), *Aid chains and advocacy in the Global South: asset, nuisance or necessary evil? - literature review*, Leiden/Nijmegen, African Studies Centre/CAOS
- 3 Elbers, W. & Kamstra, J. (2020), Organisational capacity and advocacy effectiveness - taking stock of existing research, in: Elbers, W. (ed.), *Pushing boundaries in disability advocacy - Breaking down barriers to inclusion*, 's-Hertogenbosch, Lilië Fonds: 73-80

**Managerial professionalisation**

Driven by the results-agenda and increasing accountability pressures, INGOs have widely adopted managerial 'professional' standards in such fields as finances (independent financial auditing), planning (use of logical framework, strategic plans) and governance (formalised operating procedures). The need to comply with these standards makes Southern CSOs also professional. This has real consequences for their identity, how they operate and how they are structured. The catch is that this 'development marketplace' professionalisation can drive a wedge between local CSOs from their constituencies.

**Preference for 'professional' Southern CSOs**

Most INGOs prefer to work with Southern CSOs that can deliver results, manage accountability requirements and pose less (financial) risk. In practice, this often implies a preference for established, urban-based and bigger CSOs over more informal, rural-based and smaller CSOs. From an advocacy perspective, this preference can be limiting and problematic. First, it limits the range of possible roles and tactics required for advocacy. For example, 'professional' CSOs are usually closer to the government and use expert knowledge to influence power holders. In contrast, grassroots organisations, community groups and membership organisations tend to have more mobilisation capacity and representational legitimacy. Second, 'professional' CSOs are more likely to have an urban-elite bias while less 'professional' CSOs are associated with stronger grassroots ties, a membership base and a better understanding of constituency interests.

**Rigid and linear approach to programming**

Effective advocacy is associated with flexibility as outcomes are shaped by rapidly changing circumstances. For example, new opponents may rise, decisions may be delayed, allies may change, the media may become critical and original goals may lose relevance. Southern CSOs should thus be able to adapt. This requires an approach that accommodates flexibility. Yet, the planning, monitoring and evaluation systems of INGOs can be limited in their ability to handle unpredictable, process-oriented and difficult to measure interventions; precisely the characteristics of advocacy. The underlying issue here is that some INGOs implicitly, and often unknowingly, assume that social and political change occurs in a linear process which can be planned and controlled.

**Final thoughts**

The above analysis carries two main messages. First, that there are many ways in which INGOs can have an added value in the advocacy interventions of local CSOs; ways that are not always known or recognised. Second, that some practices of INGOs (whether given in by their involvement in international aid chains or not) are detrimental to local CSOs' advocacy. Greater awareness of possible enabling roles and constraining practices is the first step towards enhancing the added value for INGO in advocacy. The analysis presented here offers concrete starting-points to INGOs for maximising their added value while minimising or eliminating possible constraining practices they are engaged in. It offers a frame of reference and shared language to enable and enhance strategic reflection.