

Breaking down Barriers

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Organizational capacity and advocacy effectiveness

Taking stock of existing research

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Executive summary

Despite a growing interest in advocacy for marginalized groups within international development, the relationship between organisational capacity and advocacy effectiveness is not yet fully understood. This paper synthesises existing empirical research on advocacy for marginalised groups in the global South. It presents a framework that identifies the main enabling factors for advocacy effectiveness and the organizational capacities and requirements associated with these factors. The paper disentangles the abstract notion of 'advocacy capacity' into more concrete components and clarifies how different capacities contribute to advocacy effectiveness. Eight core 'advocacy capacities' are identified which are the capacity to (1) produce evidence, (2) inspire trust among power holders, (3) represent constituency interests, (4) analyse the political arena, (5) produce tailored messages, (6) work collectively, (7) build rapport with power holders and (8) adapt to on-going changes in the environment. Finally, the paper offers a reflection on the promises and pitfalls of applying the capacity framework in real-world settings.

Introduction

Driven by the need to find effective solutions to poverty and injustice, researchers, policymakers and practitioners in the international development sector are showing greater interest in civil society's advocacy role. Traditional service delivery approaches are increasingly perceived as having limited structural impact. As such, there is a growing interest in a complementary political approach, which challenges the underlying power structures that perpetuate marginalisation. In taking up an advocacy role, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) organise and mobilise constituencies, raise awareness, shape public opinion, and engage with decision-makers to influence key policies.

Systematic insight in the relationship between organisational capacity and advocacy effectiveness is lacking. This paper addresses this gap by synthesizing existing academic research on the topic. It draws on an upcoming publication of Elbers & Kamstra (forthcoming)¹ which examines advocacy research undertaken in 31 countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. The paper discusses the following questions: (1) What organizational capacities are key to CSOs' ability to undertake effective advocacy? (2) How do these capacities contribute to effective advocacy?

Advocacy capacity and context

We define advocacy as a 'wide range of activities that are

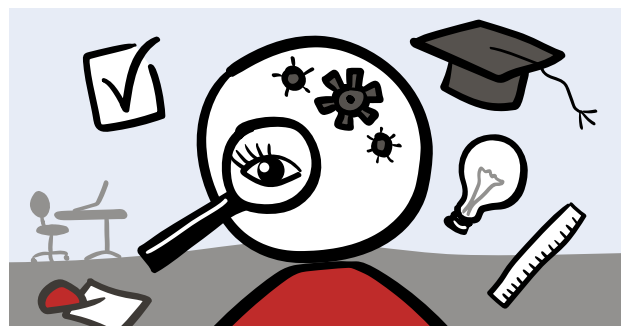
conducted to influence decision makers at different levels with the overall aim of combatting the structural causes of poverty and injustice'. This makes advocacy especially relevant in a development context where large groups of people are left behind. Advocacy then becomes a tool for these marginalised groups to take matters into their own hands and stand up for their rights.

While this paper assumes that organizational capacity is a major determinant of advocacy effectiveness, it is important to point out that effectiveness also depends on enabling or constraining contextual factors. Examples of such factors are the openness of the political regime, existing policies and treaties that might provide leverage, the presence or absence of allies within the government and the potential to form alliances. This means that even if an organization has the 'right' capacities to engage in advocacy, the environment may be such that chances for success are limited from the onset. The opposite is also possible: an organization may have relatively few capacities but may still be able to be effective due to a favourable context.

Capacity framework

Table 1 summarizes the most important elements for advocacy effectiveness. It distinguishes between (1) enabling factors for advocacy effectiveness, (2) capacities needed to create these factors, and (3) the organisational requirements underlying these capacities. While the table identifies eight capacities associated with effective advocacy, their actual relevance in practice depends on the context. The same holds for the organizational requirements associated with each capacity.

Produce evidence



A CSO's persuasiveness depends for an important part on the credibility of its claims. This requires the capacity to produce evidence. Besides making power holders more susceptible to influencing, a well-documented factual basis increases the chances of media coverage. Being able to gather evidence is particularly important in countries where governmental agencies are under-resourced and lack up-to-date knowledge and expertise. Governmental agencies may want to use CSOs as a source of knowledge and expertise, which the latter can use to gain access to power holders. In terms of organisational requirements, CSOs either need to have in-house research capacity or maintain relations with reputable knowledge institutes for producing evidence. In dealing with the latter, CSOs have to be able to commission and critique research.

Table 1. Effective advocacy: enabling factors, capacities and organizational requirements

Enabling factors	Related Capacities	Key organisational requirements
Credible claim	Produce evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In-house research skills - Relations with knowledge institutes - Ability to commission and critique research
Credible organization	Inspire trust among power holders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ability to cultivate a good reputation - Track record - Integrity - Capable leadership
Grassroots embeddedness	Represent constituency interests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Clear constituency - Channels of communication with constituency - Mechanisms for participation and accountability
Clear stakeholder engagement strategy	Analyse the political arena	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ability to conduct stakeholder and institutional analyses - Access to information - Knowledge of relevant laws, policies and treaties
Clear communication strategy	Produce tailored messages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ability to frame, target and time messages - Relations with audiences and media channels
Coalition of likeminded organisations	Work collectively	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Willingness to work together - Ability to maintain external relations - Awareness of one's added value and complementarity to others
Personal relationships with power holders	Build rapport with power holders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ability to find common ground - Ability to analyse power holders' personal and institutional interests - Proximity to power holders
Flexible strategy	Adapt to on-going environmental changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Organisational structures, procedures and culture which accommodate flexibility - Ability to detect and act upon relevant changes in the environment - Ability to reflect upon validity of tactics

Inspire trust amongst power holders



CSOs have a bigger chance of influencing power holders when they are perceived as credible organisations. As credibility is closely related to trust, CSOs need to have the capacity to inspire trust among power holders. Trust is the firm belief in the reliability, truth, or ability of someone or something. It is based on relations and perceptions, and therefore has to be carefully built and maintained over time. This implies that the ability to cultivate one's reputation as a trustworthy CSO is a key organisational requirement. Trust however, is not only built on image, but also stems from substance and actions, namely from having a track record in a particular field, from integrity, and from having a reputable leadership. As a record of past performance, a track record is typically taken as an indicator of likely future performance. CSOs which are perceived to be good at what they do are more likely to be viewed as a reliable party. Similarly, act consistently in accordance with their core principles, they also are more likely to be viewed as a reliable party. Finally, capable leadership is associated with all of the above, namely, strong organizational performance, integrity and reputation.

Represent constituency interests



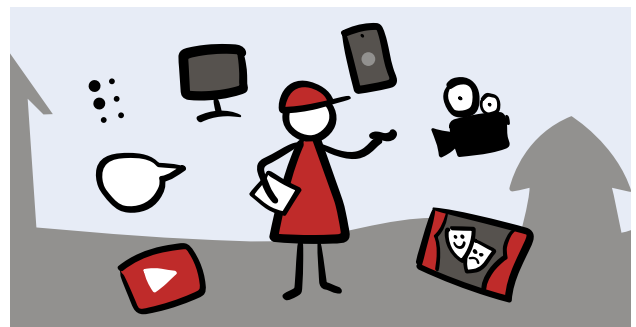
Whether advocacy is for, with or by marginalised groups, CSOs need some form of grassroots embeddedness to be seen as legitimate advocates. This requires CSOs to have the capacity to represent constituency interests. This is not self-evident as CSOs often fail to clarify in whose name they speak, why they are authorized to act, and to whom they are accountable. To be able to represent constituency interests, CSOs first of all need a clear constituency with whom they communicate regularly. Ultimately, claims about representation are only credible when the views, needs and interests of the marginalized groups are accurately taken into account. This can be achieved by taking a participatory approach throughout the advocacy process. Besides enhancing credibility, this also contributes to a sense of ownership by constituencies, especially when paired with strong accountability mechanisms towards them. Additionally, participation forms the basis for mobilization which may be necessary for sending a strong message.

Analyse the political arena



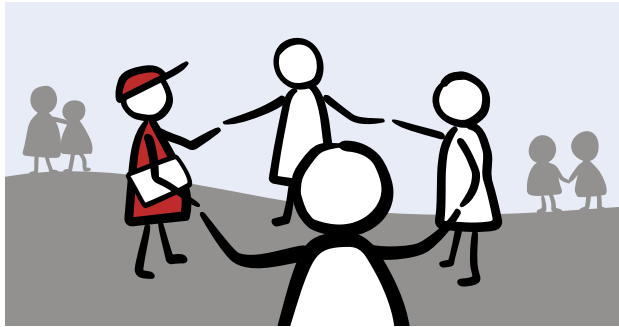
Effective advocacy strategies require a stakeholder engagement strategy that identifies relevant stakeholders (i.e. power holders, allies and opponents) and outlines a suitable relational approach towards them. This requires the capacity to analyse the political arena. Besides the stakeholders within the arena, also the nature of the arena itself is of importance. Relevant power holders may be located at different levels (i.e. local, regional, national) depending on the issue and the political system (i.e. centralized or decentralized). In terms of organisational requirements, CSOs need to be able to conduct stakeholder and institutional analyses, and have appropriate access to information to feed into such analyses. They need to be able to gather information from a variety of sources (i.e. government, media, research) to get a clear picture on stakeholder interests and positions. Knowledge of relevant laws, policies and treaties is equally important as it can provide opportunities for dialogues with power holders.

Produce tailored messages



To motivate power holders, constituencies, the wider public, and potential allies to take action, CSOs need a clear communication strategy. Strategic communication is about the capacity to produce tailored messages that succeed in touching hearts (beliefs, values) and minds (interests). Regarding organisational requirements, CSOs need to be able to frame, target and time messages. This is about formulating narratives that resonate with the norms, values and interests of target audiences, whilst aligning communication with key events (i.e. elections, international summits) to maximize impact. Additionally, CSOs need to understand the pro's and con's of different communication channels for reaching different audiences. For example, some audiences are best reached through national media, while others are best reached through social media, songs or theatre. Relationships with media outlets and journalists are typically helpful for access and coverage.

Work collectively



CSOs that build advocacy coalitions with likeminded organisations have a greater chance of success than individual organizations. Working collectively adds value in several ways and is therefore an important capacity for advocacy effectiveness. Working together creates the potential to combine different skillsets, share crucial information, increase campaign visibility, mobilise larger groups, increase the scope of activities and reduce risks. In terms of organisational requirements, CSOs need to be willing to work together and invest in an often complex and time-consuming relationship. In addition, advocates need the skills to build and maintain external relations. This involves coordinating joint activities, representing the organization externally and collecting and sharing information. Finally, members of advocacy coalitions require a sound understanding of both their own, and other organizations' added value to the coalition to ensure complementarity.

Build rapport with power holders



Effective advocacy strategies often involve informal personal relationships with power holders and their staff. Capacity-wise, this is about being able to build rapport. Such rapport facilitates access to power holders which can be used for gathering information, pitching ideas, and mobilizing support. The ability to find common ground is an important organizational requirement for building rapport. A connection can for instance be made on shared experiences, membership of the same ethnic or religious group or coming from the same geographical area. Being aware of the personal and institutional interests of power holders is also crucial.

Further reading

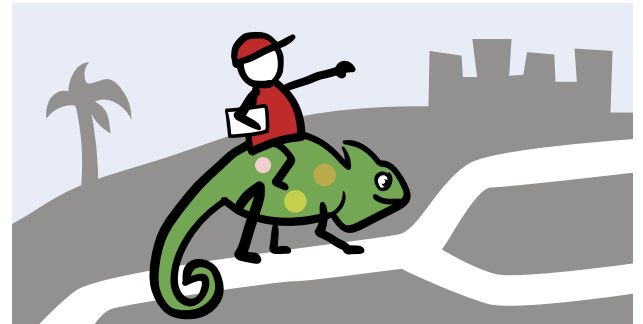
Elbers W. & Kamstra J. (forthcoming). *Which capacities are associated with effective advocacy? Taking stock of advocacy research in development contexts.*

Notes

1 Willem Elbers is academic project-leader of 'Breaking Down Barriers' at the African Studies Centre Leiden (Netherlands). Jelmer Kamstra is Senior Researcher at the Policy and Operations Evaluation Department (IOB) of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The Netherlands.

For instance, CSOs that are able to generate positive press for them are more likely to get their support. As building rapport costs time and requires sustained efforts, physical presence close to power holders is beneficial. Being located in a capital city, for example, is crucial for connecting with national level decision-makers.

Adapt to on-going changes in the environment



Effective advocacy is associated with flexibility as outcomes are shaped by rapidly changing circumstances. New opponents may rise, decisions may be delayed, allies may change, the media may become critical and original goals may lose relevance. This implies that organizations should have the capacity to adapt to on-going changes in the environment. CSOs therefore need structures, procedures and cultures which accommodate flexibility. They need to be able to analyse day-to-day political developments and respond quickly. This also implies a constant reflection upon the validity of tactics. A change in government might for instance require a change from confrontational to cooperative tactics.

How (not) to use this framework

The framework presented here can be used in several ways by CSOs, donors and evaluators/researchers. It can be used as a tool for identifying strengths and weaknesses, improving capacity strengthening initiatives, keeping track of capacity changes, and for facilitating reflection on advocacy trajectories. How the framework will be used ultimately determines its usefulness. Especially in case of capacity strengthening, it runs the risk of being used as a blueprint by donor agencies. This risk is real as many donors have embraced managerial thinking which has led to similar practices and standards for CSOs across the globe. As a consequence, CSOs become increasingly similar and 'professional', and face difficulties in maintaining their identity, values and grassroots connections, all of which affect their capacity and legitimacy to advocate for marginalised groups. Also, a blueprint approach ignores the fact that not all CSOs need the same organizational capacities. Which capacities (and underlying organizational requirements) are relevant depends on contextual factors, the nature of advocacy interventions and whether advocacy is implemented alone or in coalitions. Therefore, we argue for tailor-made and locally owned capacity strengthening trajectories.