

Breaking down Barriers

photo: Johannes Ode

PROJECT
SHEET

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Effective advocacy for children with disabilities

Why the political system matters¹

Zuleikha Mohammed & Willem Elbers²

Executive summary

There is a great need for inclusive policies and practices which give Children with Disabilities (CWDs) equal opportunities to participate in society. Whilst civil society organisations can promote the rights of CWDs through lobby and advocacy, the factors that determine advocacy success remain poorly understood. Based on evidence from Cameroon, this study illustrates how a country's political system can both enable and constrain advocacy for CWDs. It shows that local NGOs have more opportunities to engage in successful advocacy when key power holders are close by, lack resources and can profit electorally from 'partnering' with the NGO concerned. In addition, the study found that in restrictive settings where critical civil society voices are not tolerated, existing governmental policies on disability offer a legitimate base to engage power holders.

Introduction

People with disabilities are amongst the most marginalized and impoverished people. Children with Disabilities (CWDs) in particular are vulnerable, considering that they often cannot raise their voice and depend on their family and caretakers. Marginalisation and discrimination faced by people and children with disabilities are typically rooted in prejudices such as the underestimation of the potential of the individual, stereotyping, and the lack of knowledge or simply fear of disability. In many societies, different cultural beliefs can additionally enforce stigmas leading to exclusion and neglect, physical abuse and severely low employment opportunities.

Overall, there is a great need for inclusive policies which provide equal opportunities for people with disabilities, especially children. Civil society organizations can play an important role in promoting the rights of and opportunities for CWDs through lobby and advocacy. Effective engagement in lobby and advocacy requires a clear understanding of the factors that determine its success. As of yet, however, these success factors remain poorly understood.

Drawing on evidence in Cameroon, this paper seeks to improve our understanding of the success factors of advocacy. In particular, it examines how the political system - the way in which politics and governance are organized - affects the ability of local NGOs to engage in advocacy work for CWDs.

¹'Breaking down Barriers' was initiated by the Liliane Foundation and the African Studies Centre (Leiden University) to identify the success factors of advocacy for children with disabilities. Together with local partners in Sierra Leone (One Family People) and in Cameroon (CBCHS), the programme aims to build capacity for effective disability advocacy.



Open Door Day of Inclusive Education at Government Bilingual High School in Kumbo, Cameroon. A SEEPD-programme's initiative.

The case study

This study on which this paper is based examined the SEEPD-programme in Cameroon. SEEPD stands for Socio Economic Empowerment of People with Disabilities and is implemented by the Cameroon Baptist Convention Health Services (CBCHS), a local NGO based in Bamenda. At the same time CBCHS is partner of the Liliane Foundation in Cameroon. The SEEPD-programme is funded by CBM, an international NGO seeking to improve the quality of life of people with disabilities in the poorest communities of the world. In 2009, CBCHS noticed that there were almost no children with impairments in mainstream schools in Cameroon. Moreover, even if CWDs managed to go to school, they faced additional difficulties such as a governmental examination regulations that do not take the special needs of CWDs into account.

In response to these problems the SEEPD-programme was developed. SEEPD aims to empower CWDs in the North West region by increasing their attendance in government schools and convincing the government to make inclusive education the official standard in Cameroon. Inclusive education happens when children with and without disabilities participate and learn together in the same classes. Advocacy has been an important strategy in the programme and SEEPD has targeted a range of governmental power holders at different levels. The most notable power holders are the Ministry of Education, Regional Delegates (responsible for education policy at the regional level), the General Certificate of Education Board (or GCE Board, responsible for examination policy) and municipal Councils (responsible for budget allocation for community development).

To convince power holders about the need for inclusive education, CBCHS has used a variety of advocacy strategies. These include public education

through the media (television, radio and newspapers), formal and informal meetings with power holders, piloting inclusive education in government schools and providing specialized advisory support to strengthen the government's capacity in the field of inclusive education.

Advocacy outcomes

Since its inception in 2009, SEEPD has achieved a number of important advocacy successes. The most notable ones include:

- 1 *Sensitisation of key power holders regarding the need for inclusive education.* Inclusive education, previously a neglected topic in Cameroon, has become a visible issue, both in terms of the existing problems and the solutions it requires. Prior to directly sensitising power-holders, SEEPD first ensured that parents of CWDs expressed a demand for inclusive education. This was achieved through a weekly radio-show and community sensitisation work.
- 2 *Implementation of inclusive education in 17 pilot schools.* SEEPD got the authorization to pilot inclusive education in 17 regular government schools. Besides providing education opportunities to CWDs, the pilot schools served to demonstrate to the government that inclusive education is feasible. Ensuring full implementation of inclusive education to some extent remained a challenge.
- 3 *Improved Examination Conditions for CWDs.* SEEPD managed to convince the government (GCE Board) in the English-speaking North-West and South-West region to adopt a new examination policy that takes the special needs of CWDs into account. Amongst other things, SEEPD provided an embosser to the GCE Board for improved braille translation of exams.
- 4 *Signing of action plans for disability mainstreaming by 18 Municipal Councils.* SEEPD convinced a

number of Councils to mainstream disability issues, particularly regarding education, in municipal policy and budget allocation. In each Council, a focal person was installed who acts as an intermediary between SEEPD and the Councils. The key question now is how the political system in Cameroon enabled and constrained CBCHS in achieving these outcomes. This brings us to the next section.

Opportunities for advocacy

The study found that the political system in Cameroon provided four major opportunities for CBCHS to engage in advocacy.

First, decentralization in Cameroon has created opportunities to access relevant power holders precisely in the part (North-West Region) where CBCHS' network and reputation are strongest. Since 2004 the political system in Cameroon has been decentralized. For the implementation of education policy, the central state authority (Ministry of Education in Yaoundé) relies on a number of other government agencies such as the Regional Delegates, the GCE Board and municipal Councils. These power holders have the authority to create and implement policies, as long as these are in line with national policy. For SEEPD having relevant power holders situated closely at its headquarters had several advantages. First of all, it contributed to power holders' willingness to listen to SEEPD's advocacy message as CBCHS could approach power holders in the area (North-West Region) where its reputation, track record and network is strongest. Moreover, these power holders' close proximity to the CBCHS headquarters greatly reduced travelling distances which contributed to their willingness to participate in workshops whilst reducing transportation costs.

Second, local level power holders have been receptive to CBCHS because decentralization has given them considerable responsibilities for which

they do not have the expertise or resources to fulfill. Since the decentralization of the political system in Cameroon, there has been a devolution of responsibilities and authority to local power holders. The transfer of responsibilities from the central state, however, has not been matched by the transfer of resources. As a consequence, local power holders tend to lack the capacities and resources to fulfill their mandate. Consequently, local power holders are encouraged by central state authorities to raise their own (additional) funding. This makes them receptive to working with reputable NGOs such as CBCHS, which offers them opportunities to gain access to resources.

Third, the electoral concerns of municipal Councils in Cameroon has made them receptive to CBCHS which offered opportunities for favorable publicity. In Cameroon Municipal Councils and Mayors are elected. This makes them sensitive to favorable publicity as their future position depends on positive election outcomes. By being seen as creating and implementing policies that benefit the community, Councils hope to generate such publicity. CBCHS was aware of the Councils' electoral interests and was therefore keen to present its advocacy message as an opportunity for the Councils to better fulfill their responsibilities and generate a positive press. While engaging the Councils, SEEPD could build upon its public education work which had also aimed to make disability an issue that voters would be concerned about. CBCHS used its media team to generate publicity for any council (in)action related to inclusive education.

Fourth, in a restrictive setting where critical civil society voices are not tolerated, existing governmental policies on disability offered a legitimate base for CBCHS to engage power holders. The political culture in Cameroon is such that civil society organizations that openly challenge the authority of governmental bodies are not tolerated. This means that advocacy organizations must be very careful in how they engage power holders. Within this restrictive setting, advocacy opportunities lie for an important part in existing policies and conventions which the government has ratified. For promoting the rights of CWDs this is not necessarily a problem as many problems related to CWDs in Cameroon are not so much caused by the absence of good laws and policies, but by the fact that they are not properly implemented. While approaching local power holders, CBCHS made sure that it was not perceived as a "troublemaker" while highlighting that its demands were in line with existing national policies.



PDNP (Programme National de Développement Participatif) says it is ready to collaborate with the SEEPD-programme in promoting disability-inclusive development.

Sustainability of advocacy outcomes

The study also found that the sustainability of the advocacy successes achieved by CBCHS in the long run could potentially be undermined by precisely those features of the political system which enabled SEEPD to be successful in the first place.

First, whilst decentralization offers opportunities to access the government at the local level, advocacy successes achieved at this level may be undermined by power holders higher up in the line of authority. Due to decentralization, CBCHS could gain access to relevant local-level power holders located in the area where its sphere of influence was strongest. While these local power holders have the authority to create and implement policies as long as these fit national policies, they can be overruled by power holders higher up in the chain of authority. In the case of SEEPD, a number of teachers who had been trained under the programme to teach inclusively were transferred by the Ministry of Education to other schools. This contributed to several of the schools struggling to implement inclusive education.

Second, whilst local power holders' lack of resources offers opportunities to engage in advocacy, it also may undermine the sustainability of results obtained. Part of the achievements of SEEPD in the field of inclusive education can be

attributed to local power holders' lack of funds and capacity and subsequent willingness to work with CBCHS. The lack of funds, however, means that the continued implementation of inclusive education in the pilot schools to a certain degree depends on the resources brought in by the SEEPD-programme. This raises doubts as to whether the achievements can be sustained and up-scaled in the long term. CBCHS has recognized this and is currently reaching out to the Ministry of Education which is responsible for making national education policy and controls the national education budget.

Third, whilst electoral dynamics at the level of municipal Councils offer opportunities to engage in advocacy, they also have the potential to undermine the sustainability of achievements. Councilors and Mayors are preoccupied by electoral concerns and they want to be viewed as creating and implementing policies that benefit the community. While SEEPD made use of these electoral concerns, the question is whether the agreements with the Councils will survive the next elections, particularly if new Mayors and Council-members are elected. This is particularly important because SEEPD's successes at the local level for an important part depend on the personal relations that were developed with individual Councilors and Mayors.



We Ring the Bell campaign in Benin. In front of the Parliament 600 children advocated Inclusive Education. On their behalf Ines (18) in sign language made a passionate plea to the Parliament's President. Hearing fellow student Jonita (12) translated her appeal. We Ring the Bell is an worldwide initiative of the Liliane Foundation aiming at raising awareness for the right to education of children with disabilities.

Further reading

Mohammed Z. (2016). *Easy Access, Easy Wins? Advocating for Inclusive Education in Cameroon. MA-thesis.* Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam. See www.barriersfree.org

Notes

¹ We would like to acknowledge the support of CBM in conducting this study and sharing the lessons learned from the SEEPD-programme.

² Willem Elbers is academic project-leader of 'Breaking down Barriers' at the African Studies Centre Leiden.