International Advocacy: Measuring performance and effectiveness

Dr Linda Kelly

Dr Linda Kelly
paulnichols@onaustralia.com.au
Praxis Consultants Ptd Ltd.

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Abstract
International aid and development work increasingly includes attention to policy and advocacy interventions as well as traditional field programs and direct aid transfers. There is a strong commitment, especially by non-government organisations, to building sustainable development through multiple interventions in poor communities, including lobbying and other advocacy on their behalf. The measurement and evaluation of this work has proven difficult and little research about the efficacy of this work has been undertaken in Australia. Traditional monitoring and evaluation approaches are difficult to apply when trying to assess the long term and dynamic nature of advocacy and policy change interventions. Further, resources in non-Government Organisations are limited and therefore any assessment process must be efficient and able to achieved in a valid way without using precious public funding. This paper explores the experience and underlying theory of assessment of two different non-government organisations undertaking advocacy and policy work on behalf of poor communities around the world. The first is a major evaluation undertaken of the advocacy work of Oxfam Community Aid Abroad. The second is an ongoing development of performance assessment and measurement of the research and policy work undertaken by the Foundation for Development Cooperation. Both assessments seek to lead to organisational improvement and therefore increased performance in assisting poor communities achieve sustainable development. The methods and results suggest that organisations with limited resources can best track the effectiveness of their advocacy work through attention to existing known best practice, as well as some assessment of actual outcomes.

Key Words
non-government organisations, advocacy, lobbying, policy change, performance measurement.

Introduction

Typically, international aid and development work designed to assist poor people and communities in other countries has focused on resource transfer. Money, people and other resources are provided by richer countries or organisations to assist poor people and poor communities to improve their development. The underlying paradigm assumes that people are poor because they have insufficient resources to help themselves and that a more equitable distribution of basic resources will give them the means to begin a process of improvement and development.

International Non-Government Development Organisations (INGOs) have tended to adopt this paradigm, working most often in micro situations of community or local government areas, assisting people through provision of money, staff, training, knowledge or other resources. Evaluation of this type of work has tended to focus upon the outcomes of specific projects or programs, with attention given to the way a specific intervention or transfer of resources has assisted people within a limited timeframe.

The resources transfer approach to development remains a seductive view of the world that continues to dominate most debates and thinking about aid. Increasingly, however, some organisations, especially INGOs, have recognised that people remain poor, not because they have too few resources or knowledge to change their situation, but because other people have the power and control that prevents them from determining and acting for their own development. Sources of power vary, although most often they arise from a combination of social determinants such as gender, ethnicity and religion and political and economic determinants. The critical issue is that resource transfer alone is inadequate for development of poor people and poor communities. Attention has to be given to the lack of power that prohibits people from controlling their own development.

As a response, INGOs have increasingly become more directly engaged in advocating for changes in local, national and international systems that discriminate and oppress people and prevent them from achieving their full development potential (Fowler, 2000; Hudson, 2000a; Hudson, 2000b; Davies, 2001). This advocacy and lobbying work is difficult to categorise or describe in simple terms. It ranges from major international campaigns such as the Jubilee campaign for debt relief, to small-scale advocacy such as lobbying against human rights abuse in a local area or working with communities to minimise gender discrimination.

While it remains secondary to the direct fieldwork undertaken by most of the INGOs in Australia, recent research indicates that advocacy work among Australian INGOs is increasing (Ollif, 2001). There is a view that in order to be effective, INGOs should be involved in a combination of resource transfer and advocacy and lobbying at various levels, from the local through national, regional and international (Lindenberg & Bryant, 2001).

Despite this trend to increasing advocacy, it appears that few organisations, both in Australia and internationally, have evaluated their work until recently and most have struggled with suitable methods and approaches that enable them to be clear about the usefulness of advocacy work (Hudson, 2000, 2000a; Davies, 2001, Ollif, 2001).

This paper explores the reasons why assessment of advocacy work is difficult. It draws upon the experience of two Australian INGOs to suggest ways in which organisations can begin to track the effectiveness of their advocacy work. Particular attention needs to be given to the connection between advocacy, especially international advocacy, and the actual change experienced by people in poor communities. Ultimately the change experienced by people is the only true determinant of the value of advocacy work in international aid and development.

Monitoring and evaluating advocacy

Advocacy, which can include public campaigning and awareness raising and/or more private strategies of lobbying, research and documentation and policy influence, is more difficult to assess than other more traditional development interventions (Roche, 1999). On one hand this is related to the nature of advocacy interventions, with each campaign or action being a unique combination of strategies, targets and outcomes which makes it difficult to allow for simple comparisons between interventions over time.

On the other hand there are also problems with the very process of advocacy. Effective advocacy is rarely a simple and straightforward process. It tends to combine a gradual accumulation of attention and focus, with occasional precipitive events, causing organisations to play multiple roles often spread among various departments (Sutton, 1999, Iied, 2000). It tends to rely upon action by many players, sometimes without each being fully aware of the contributions and actions of the other. It operates in a context that is often unpredictable and can lead to unexpected changes and outcomes. Traditional evaluation and monitoring methods, which compare outcomes with original objectives based upon assumptions of linear progression and limited variables, are not useful for tracking change and evaluating the success of this type of process (Fowler, 1997).

The literature on alternative approaches to advocacy monitoring and evaluation suggests that two, complementary processes are required to enable organisations to understand what they have achieved through their advocacy work. The first is to treat every advocacy intervention as a unique undertaking. Measuring outcomes relies upon building up a picture of what has happened that gives due attention to the unique context, targets, focus and resources of that intervention (Miller, 1994). Suggested methods include casestudies, journals, timelines and story telling. All focus upon gathering sufficient data to build an understanding of what outcomes were achieved within that particular context (Creech, 2001).

Oxfam Community Aid Abroad

Oxfam Community Aid Abroad (OCAA) is an Australian INGO with a long history of undertaking advocacy. It was one of the first INGOs in Australia to dedicate staff and resources to development of high quality advocacy and campaigning work in order to complement its direct field development and relief work.

In 2000 OCAA decided that it needed to evaluate the advocacy work of the organisation, specifically to assess the effectiveness of that work. Using a casestudy approach for three different campaigns, the review sought to examine original objectives against achievements in order to build a picture of the overall trends and key issues that influenced the process and outcomes of each campaign (Kelly, et al 2001).

The review examined the 'story' of each campaign in detail, from the perspectives of various stakeholders. These included people who were the targets of the campaigns, those who were the intended beneficiaries and those who undertook the advocacy work itself. Information and reflection was also sought from external observers and experts. The methodology relied upon a triangulated process where assessments needed to be shared across various stakeholder groups and other data sources in order to be determined as valid findings.

The evaluation was helpful in pointing to what specific campaigns had achieved after many years of operation and what had contributed to their success or otherwise. The review tended to show that over time, campaign outcomes often were considerably different to the original objectives of the program and that circumstances and opportunities had led to unintended outcomes, both positive and negative, as well as considerable new action and strategies. The summative form of evaluation was useful for final learning; but coming so long after the beginning of campaigns and reflecting such major operational changes, it was clearly less helpful for management and improvement of advocacy work during implementation.

An alternative and complementary approach to measuring the effectiveness of advocacy is to measure ongoing performance. That is, to expand monitoring to a level of performance assessment that allows for judgements about effectiveness to be made on an ongoing basis.

Foundation for Development Cooperation

The Foundation for Development Cooperation (FDC) is an independent, non-profit organisation based in Brisbane. Its work includes strategic research, policy development and advocacy directed towards sustainable development and poverty reduction in Asia and the Pacific. Because of the very nature of its work FDC has a strong interest in being able to measure effectiveness of advocacy and in particular research and policy development work. The organisation needs to know that its higher level lobbying and policy discussions are providing useful and positive change for people in poor communities in the target countries.

In 2001 FDC commissioned the development of a performance assessment framework that would assist it to measure its work in an ongoing and rigorous way (Kelly, 2002). The framework that was developed rested upon two features. First a thorough examination of the features of effective advocacy, based upon an international review of available advocacy evaluations. Second, consideration of performance monitoring frameworks within non-profit organisations and the features required to ensure their effective application.

The review of international advocacy and campaign work pointed to several features common to effectives advocacy and policy change work. These included a clear and accessible program logic (Chapman & Wameyo, 2001; Creech 2001; Davies, 2001). They also included realistic and specific objectives, which flow from the program logic, and able to be achieved within the timeframe of the planned intervention (Roche, 1999; Davies, 2001; Kelly et al, 2001). Objectives should be understood and shared by all stakeholders. (Davies, 2001).

The program logic of an intervention will be updated and redeveloped as circumstances and opportunities change and therefore objectives will also change over time. Monitoring processes need to track both the fact of these changes as well as how effectively they are communicated to all stakeholders (Roche, 1999).

How the goals and objectives of the intervention are framed is critical for both immediate clarity of purpose and for building broader and long-term support for an issue (Miller, 1994). Effective advocacy campaigns frame the issue or goal of the intervention with attention to both short term, specific and achievable objectives and long term transformational goals.

Legitimacy is considered an asset in campaigning and advocacy work that can change according to the performance of the organisation and because of changes in the external context (Hudson, 2000a; Chapman & Fisher, 2000). Maintenance of the legitimacy of the organisation or coalition of organisations is considered an important indicator of the ability of that organisation/s to achieve its planned outcomes (Davies, 2001).

Of particular importance to the legitimacy of most INGO advocacy is the knowledge they have of the work being undertaken in development interventions in poor communities. Information needs to be up to date, detailed and accurate in order to protect the legitimacy of northern NGOs (Fowler, 1997, Hudson, 2001, Johns, 2001). At the same time the very process of gathering this information and experience in order to influence policy change can itself be a collaborative or disempowering process for the Southern partners which in turn may undermine the very purpose of advocacy on their behalf (Jordan & Tuijl, 1998). This in turn suggests that the process of relationship, as well as the quality of the information made available from people and communities, should be monitored throughout the advocacy intervention (Davies, 2001).

Much advocacy work is undertaken in coalitions or alliances of organisations (Ollif, 2001; Chapman & Fisher, 2000) and the most successful advocacy is built upon the strength of many different organisations undertaking different roles and often approaching the key issue from different perspectives (Edwards, 1993). The way organisations work together can therefore be critical to the success of the advocacy intervention and the decision making processes of a coalition therefore provide a useful indicator of the likely effectiveness of that alliance (Miller, 1994). In addition, mutual accountability between organisations in a network or alliance is considered a good indicator of the degree to which organisations are usefully engaged with each other (Jordan & Tuijl, 1998; Davies, 2001).

The strategies and tactics of advocacy need to be adapted to the particular context and opportunities of the situation (Miller, 1994). More significantly, strategies need to be multi faceted and multi layered, drawing from the contributions of all participants, with an emphasis upon creating the best synergy between those contributions (Edwards, 1993).

Increasingly advocacy work is being understood not as one action, but as part of a series of interventions necessary for sustainable change. Many INGOs are moving toward a framework that sees advocacy interventions situated within a wider program logic or strategic plan for change that includes work at the grassroots, at national and regional interventions and also international action. Their view is that this type of 'joined-up approach' is essential to achieving sustainable change (Chapman & Wameyo, 2001). A common framework utilised by some organisations is to understand advocacy as a set of parallel processes, which involve direct policy influence, development of the capacity of civil society organisation in the south to undertake their own advocacy and the creation of democratic space to allow for the further development of civil society in a country or region (Chapman & Wameyo, 2001; Davies, 2001). Assessment of performance therefore gives attention to progress in each of these areas.

A subset of the discussion about measuring effective advocacy that was of particular interest to FDC included the use of research and documentation for policy change. This area has received some focus in recent times (Creech, 2001; Neilson, 2001; Stone et al, 2001; Williard, 2001) and the literature suggests that research should be assessed for relevance, utility and influence (Stone et al, 2001). That is, some assessment needs to be made of the quality of the research material itself in relation to the task at hand (Neilson, 2001) and its effective engagement with the discourse of the policy makers (Sutton, 1999).

Policy debates typically are overtaken by experts, excluding those who are the targets of the proposed changes (Fowler, 1997; Sutton, 1999). Effective policy focused research is self-aware and able to identify how it has enabled people to be both more informed about their situation and more able to speak about their own experience.

The nature of the engagement strategy undertaken with policy makers is key to the effective take-up of research information. Effective policy engagement requires relationship building which positions the researcher or their representative, as a person of influence with the policy maker (Neilson, 2001; Willard, 2001). Researchers have to also consider the nature of the policy environment where they operate (Neilson, 2001; Lindquist, 2001). Effective research and information dissemination rests upon adequate analysis of the policy environment and careful planning of how to present and take up opportunities in that environment (Stone et al, 2001).

Alongside identification of the common features of effective advocacy, FDC required a process for regular measurement of these features. This needed to go beyond recording the activities and immediate outputs of the organisation, to assessing the overall performance of the agency. The not for profit sector has a poor record of effective performance assessment (Hatry, 1997; Kluvers, 1998), and FDC wanted a process that would ensure some rigour and validity in the judgements they were able to make about their work.

A review of the available literature about performance assessment suggests that there are several key principles and lessons that need to be included in any organisational framework. Performance assessment rests upon the assumption that an organisation has a vision and clearly developed strategic plan for achieving that vision (Kaplan & Norton, 1993; Sawhill & Williamson, 2001). Sectional plans need to be clearly related to that detailed organisational plan (Kaplan, 1993; Rolph, 1999).

Performance measurement needs to provide a balanced picture of the state of the organisation (Van de Vliet, 1997; Corrigan, 1998; Miller, 1998), relating very clearly to the goals of the organisation but also including measures of learning and innovation (Plantz et al, 1997). Further, program level outcomes have to be clearly linked to broader efforts for change, internal and external to the organisation, in order to avoid a narrow sectional or organisational assessment which ignores the need for synergy with other areas (Plantz et al, 1997)

Research has shown that the purpose of performance assessment needs to be clear from the outset (Newcomer, 1997a). Performance assessment is a political and social construct often dominated by the more powerful stakeholders (Newcomer, 1997a). In order to ensure a more realistic process the development of performance measures should be a shared process between all stakeholders (Newcomer, 1997a; Fowler, 1997; Van de Vliet, 1997).

It is important that measurement of outcomes is aligned with both short and long term gains (Plantz et al, 1997; Chapman &Waymeyo, 2001). **Targets** require a baseline, and time and resources to develop them in meaningful ways (Plantz et al, 1997).

Davies (1997) has developed another approach that moves away from using predetermined indicators or targets to the collection of data under key change areas. Management and other stakeholders then take responsibility for analysing the data and establishing the meaning of such change for the operations and relevance of the programs and the organisation. This approach opens up the opportunity to monitor both the organisational performance and the external context, forcing organisations to remain relevant to their changing environment.

The senior management in an organisation has a critical role to play in **modelling and leading** the process of performance measurement (Latemore, 1997). The attitude and commitment of senior management to a process of learning and change, the values they model and the organisational values related to improvement, together with the rewards systems (formal and informal), which underlie organisational operations are critical in effective performance assessment (Fowler, 1997; Mayo & Brown, 1999).

Performance assessment for FDC

In summary, for FDC to develop an effective framework of performance assessment there appeared to be several strands that were required across the model. The organisation needed to situate its review of advocacy and research work within a wider program of organisational performance measurements. This organisation-wide program required careful development of a detailed plan of long term action towards key organisational goals. The more detailed the plan, the more possible it is to build useful measures of the desired outcomes. The plans should come from a mixture of internal assessment and external analysis, drawing where possible, upon the experience and examples of other organisations.

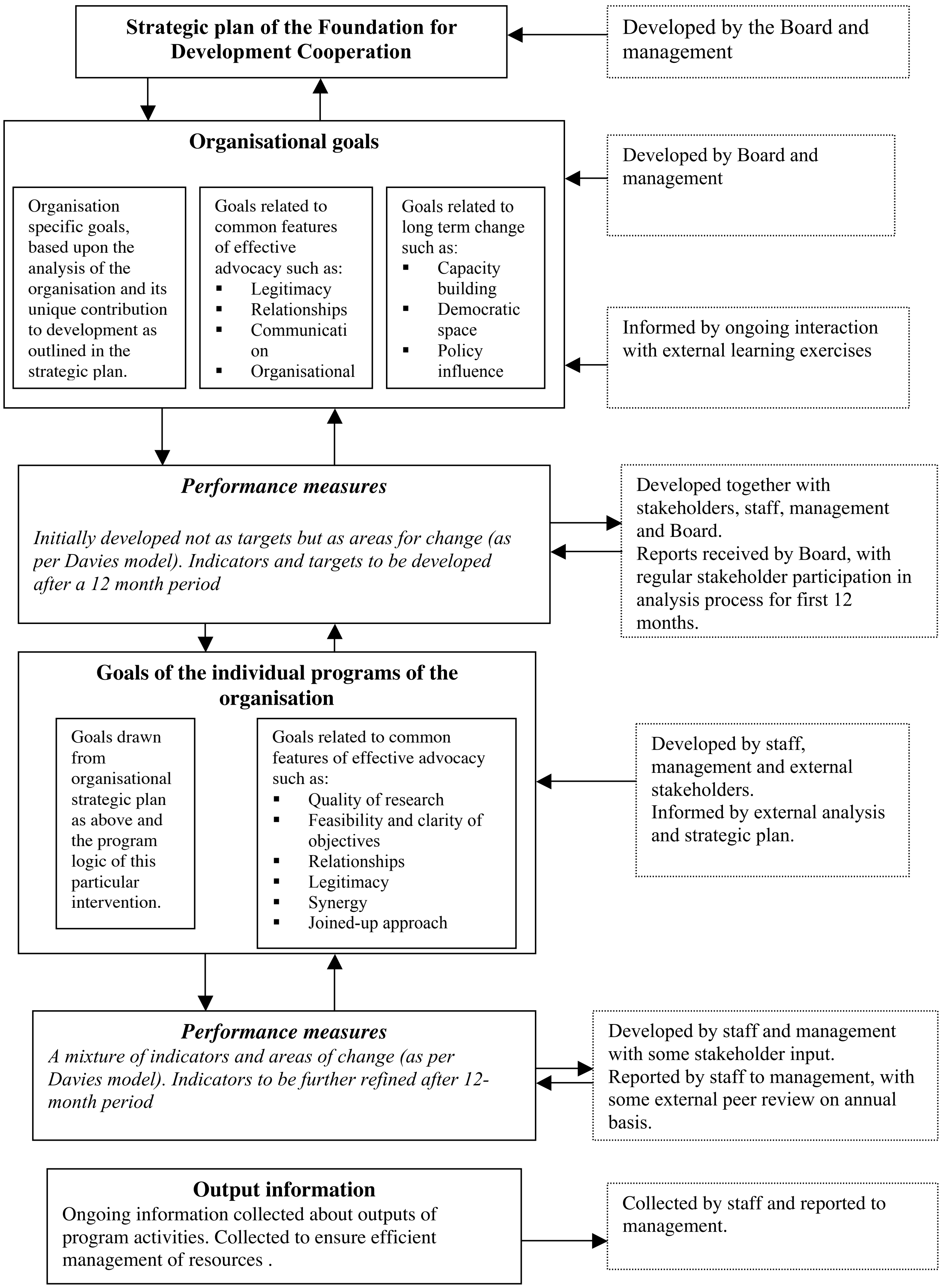
The organisation needed to ensure that its strategic plan gave attention to the key areas that would ensure both long-term success of programs and also long term viability of the organisation itself. Together with measures which are specific to the goals of FDC, the review of features of effective advocacy suggested that this required regular measurement of the legitimacy of FDC, the effectiveness of the relationships the organisation has with other key partners, in both the North and South and also the engagement and communication strategies the FDC has developed for the key targets of change. Finally the key measures had to give attention to organisational learning, the ability to draw from own experience and that of others to ensure that FDC is growing and developing in response to changing context and new information. All the stakeholders, especially beneficiaries and staff should be involved in developing the measures for these ongoing performance areas.

The specific programs that FDC had for advocacy and research in countries or sectors likewise required two types of assessment. They needed a program logic of their own with a clear analysis of the context and the available resources and potential for change. This program logic should provide an explicit link between the long-term goals of FDC and the specific objectives and activities of that program. Each program also required assessment against those areas that had been shown to be important to effective research and advocacy work. These included the quality of the research itself (relevance, utility and influence), the feasibility and clarity of objectives and the process of their development and change, the adequacy and relevance of chosen strategies, the relationships between FDC and other organisations working in coalition and the legitimacy of FDC for that particular program area.

Finally the emerging view is that effective advocacy and policy change work needs to be situated within a broader framework of change, that might be undertaken by one organisation alone, but is more likely to see multiple organisations sharing the work across different levels and locations to provide a joined-up approach to achieving change. FDC programs of advocacy and research work needed to demonstrate how their achievements are contributing towards effective outcomes in other key areas in order that people in poor communities experience sustainable and real change.

FDC required a model that was both unique to its objectives and values, yet also drew upon the broader learning available from the lessons of advocacy and policy work. The model developed for the organisation is outlined in Diagram 1. This model of performance assessment allows very close monitoring of various and related aspects of the organisational operations. It does not prove effectiveness. It indicates how closely the organisation and its programs exemplify the features of advocacy and policy change work that experience suggests are most likely to lead to positive change for poor people.

Diagram 1


Strategic plan of the Foundation for Development Cooperation
Developed by the Board and management
Organisational goals
Organisation specific goals, based upon the analysis of the organisation and its unique contribution to development as outlined in the strategic plan.
Goals related to common features of effective advocacy such as:
▪ Legitimacy
▪ Relationships
▪ Communicati on
▪ Organisational
Goals related to long term change such as:
▪ Capacity building
▪ Democratic space
▪ Policy influence
Developed by Board and management
Informed by ongoing interaction with external learning exercises
Performance measures
Initially developed not as targets but as areas for change (as per Davies model). Indicators and targets to be developed after a 12 month period
Developed together with stakeholders, staff, management and Board.
Reports received by Board, with regular stakeholder participation in analysis process for first 12 months.
Goals of the individual programs of the organisation
Goals drawn from organisational strategic plan as above and the program logic of this particular intervention.
Goals related to common features of effective advocacy such as:
▪ Quality of research
▪ Feasibility and clarity of objectives
▪ Relationships
▪ Legitimacy
▪ Synergy
▪ Joined-up approach
Developed by staff, management and external stakeholders.
Informed by external analysis and strategic plan.
Performance measures
A mixture of indicators and areas of change (as per Davies model). Indicators to be further refined after 12-month period
Developed by staff and management with some stakeholder input.
Reported by staff to management, with some external peer review on annual basis.
Output information
Ongoing information collected about outputs of program activities. Collected to ensure efficient management of resources .
Collected by staff and reported to management.

Conclusion

Measuring effectiveness in INGO advocacy is not a simple process. At its heart effective advocacy means more control for poor people and marginalised communities. Yet achieving such change can take many years and organisations need to know that their limited resources are being used in the most effective ways as they proceed.

Program evaluation and performance measurement are both required for understanding the contribution of an organisation to change (Wholey & Newcomer, 1997; Newcomer, 1997a). Performance monitoring provides timely and challenging assessment of organisational progress and the quality of its work. Program evaluation allows the organisation to periodically test the underlying hypothesis of its strategic plan and program logic. Utilised together such assessment should allow some better judgement about the difficult and dynamic process of challenging injustice for poor people and communities. Without such assessment INGOs remain exposed to their worst and most sceptical critics.

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