

Planning, Assessing and Learning from Advocacy

Workshop held by ActionAid in collaboration with INTRAC

Accra, Ghana 5-8 April 2005

REPORT

The principle aim of this workshop for ActionAid, was to present some of the findings from a three year action research project on planning, assessing and learning from advocacy, and to provide a space for workshop participants to share their experiences of assessing and learning from advocacy work.

INTRAC's aim of collaborating with ActionAid on the workshop, was to gain understanding of the monitoring and evaluation of advocacy work in the African context to help form the agenda for the Sixth International Conference on Monitoring and Evaluation to be held in Spring 2006.

The workshop was facilitated by Jenny Chapman, of ActionAid with the support of Sarah Okwaare (ActionAid Uganda) and Vincent Azumah (ActionAid Ghana).

The first day of the workshop was organised as a forum for the core workshop participants (numbering around 30) and for around 30 extra participants from organisations in Ghana. The following three days were for the 30-40 core participants from across East, West and Southern Africa.

The action research project

This was carried out over a period of three years in four countries: Brazil, Ghana, Nepal and Uganda. In each case a research facilitator worked with 1-3 partner organisations to explore some of the challenges they were facing with their advocacy work. At the start of the project, the planned focus was on developing ways to assess the impact of advocacy work as can be seen by the following quotation from the initial project document:

'The overall aim of this work is to pioneer the development of innovative tools and participatory methodologies for assessing the impact of people centred advocacy'.

However, as the project progressed it soon became clear that trying to divorce assessment from planning was inappropriate and potentially counter-productive. The researchers also came to the conclusion that 'innovative tools' are not necessarily what is required. What is important is that tools are used in a way that promotes more in-depth discussion and analysis. As such, at the workshop, emphasis was placed in presentations on the need for *critical thinking* when assessing advocacy work. The key lesson from the introductory presentation was that an advocacy campaign is an ongoing process that benefits from cycles of critical analysis of planning, action assessment and learning.

Other key lessons emerging from the research process were the importance of power analysis for the planning and assessment of advocacy and that change must be seen in terms of shifts in power and gender relations.

Response to the action research programme

It was suggested by the ActionAid research team that there had been some initial resistance at the level of country programmes to embrace fully the project and the methodology it entailed. The tools of action research are potentially quite divisive. The method involves staff within an organisation

asking difficult questions of each other, and then calling on the organisation as a whole to adopt different approaches and strategies as a result of research findings. Staff can feel worried and fearful about responding to the research process, believing that it could negatively affect their position within the organisation.

The partner organisations who had been involved in the action research project in Ghana and Uganda spoke in positive terms about the lessons they had learned and the strategies adopted that had arisen as a result of critical reflection processes. They were also positive about the different tools for assessing and learning from their work that had been used or modified with the support of the ActionAid researchers. But they were less clear about the impact of the action research methods themselves. Action research can be used very effectively as a form of self-evaluation or internal evaluation, in that it can help staff members within an organisation to think through the challenges and obstacles in their work. However, none of the partners suggested that they would continue to use this process of self-enquiry within their organisations.

Nevertheless, the partners gave the impression that involvement in the action research project had increased the amount of time that they spend in the field, and the level of input from community members into project strategies. It was stated that the action research had demanded 'continuous interaction' with communities and had generated a great deal of information about the way in which power operates at the local level. Whether this would be continued in a systematic way, now that the project has ended, was not clear.

Some challenges associated with monitoring advocacy

Assessment of advocacy campaigns is hindered by the following problems:

- Lack of effective power, gender and contextual analysis
- Lack of understanding of how change happens
- Assessment is divorced from planning
- Assessment is viewed as a technical task not as an empowering process – it is narrowly viewed in terms of accountability, rather than learning.

There is a tendency to focus on legal and political changes when assessing advocacy work, and/or to monitor campaigning activities (number of marches, for example). This type of focus will skew the M&E of advocacy work as well as the activities of the campaign itself. Changes in legislation can result in little or no change at the grassroots. The ActionAid presentations stressed that we should strive for change that is

- Advancing rights
- Advancing people's leadership
- Transforming gender and power relations

Using critical thinking and power analysis when planning for advocacy work will broaden understanding of where change can happen and the arenas and levels at which power dynamics should be redrawn. It was stressed that advocacy work should not be limited to the policy or legislative level. As a result, the following strategies to promote change were suggested:

- Consciousness raising
- Social mobilisation
- Leadership development
- Using the media
- Using research
- Building coalitions, networks and social movements

Working at these levels, in conjunction with policy work, will obviously have implications for assessment of the impact of advocacy. Very different approaches will be needed to assess attitudinal change at community level, for example, as compared with change at the policy or legislative level.

Along with the formal authorities, in the African context traditional authorities also play an important role. This presents challenges for monitoring changes in customary law, and the extent to which changes in national level legislation will impact upon attitudes and behaviour of traditional bodies.

There was a tendency amongst some participants to gloss over difficult questions about the end goal of their advocacy work. A number of organisations represented at the meeting said they were working on gender issues, particularly on violence against women. However, their strategy often involves the use of mediation: bringing together the survivor of violence and the perpetrator. This often appears to be more about achieving peaceful communities than addressing issues of gender equality. The anti-violence message was often presented through Biblical teaching – for example, that men should love their wives. This approach does not address issues of power, in particular, the predominance of patriarchal attitudes towards women, emanating from traditional leaders, and indeed, the Church. While these groups were using the rhetoric of women's rights, their focus, in practice, did not appear to have a rights base. Without clarity of aims, assessing the impact of the work will be even more of a challenge.

The use of tools and methods to assess and learn from advocacy

The researchers have noted an emphasis on tools and methods, whenever the matter of monitoring and assessing change is raised. There is often a demand for new tools, when simple, widely understood methods, when used well, can be very effective. It seems that tools can often become straightjackets, and as such are not conducive to learning, or that people swamp themselves with an unmanageable number of indicators. For the ActionAid researchers, the key to using tools is ensuring that they are combined with critical thinking, are participatory and are able to tease out power and gender dynamics.

The emphasis of the presentation on tools and methods was that advocacy is a process that has to operate at many different levels. In order to measure change, there must be an understanding both of the end goal of the advocacy initiative and of the steps towards it that will show that change is occurring. When these are clear, a continual process of critical reflection will help ensure that advocacy work is on track. Which tools to use in order to assess change will depend on the context. What is important is how these tools are used – they should not be employed in a mechanistic way, and their critical use is key. It was suggested to participants that when they were doing assessments they should continually question the information they had been given, asking 'who, what, why and when'.

One example given of this by the ActionAid researchers was the adaptation of the use of timelines (in Nepal) to make them more useful for ongoing planning and learning from advocacy work. The timeline can be used as a way of recording an organisation's history, or the steps taken to date in a campaign, without any further analysis. However, by adding critical questions to it, such as why a particular strategy had been chosen, who was involved, what kind of impact it had had and how the changing context was affecting their work, what had previously been a descriptive tool became a more dynamic instrument for learning and developing future strategies.

In discussions after a session on the use of tools, one commentator noted that these can be divorced from the reality in which they are used, and when they are imposed from outside, can be influenced by the politics of the donor. This also leads to a lack of commitment from those who are supposed to be using the tool. There was a general feeling, from the commentators that tools such as indicators are useful, and that they help people get a grip on where their work is headed, and how they hope society will change as a result of advocacy. Problems occur when indicators become overcomplicated. One suggestion was that they be reviewed regularly, or a system of

'milestones' used. This was countered by the argument that advocacy strategies must be flexible and that 'u-turns' are not unheard of. Taking this into account, it was declared by one participant that milestones would not always be useful.

Formal and informal assessment

The point of the research project was to find ways of planning, assessing and learning that were helpful to partners involved in advocacy work, not necessarily as ways to perform formal accountability functions. However, it would appear that, amongst participants at the workshop at least, ongoing, regular assessment that feeds into planning is not widely undertaken. They appeared to be more familiar with processes to gather information required by donors.

The observation that there is often an overemphasis on tools was backed up by attitudes of participants at the workshop. There was a general assumption that they would be presented with a range of new tools at this event, with which they could monitor the impact of their work. Even when the message 'it's not which tools you use' was repeated, participants continued to voice frustration that they had not been given any tools or methods to take away and try out.

In a more analytical response to the presentation on these issues, one participant noted that there is a tendency amongst organisations to accept the tools that they are handed down from above (from donors, for example). Staff of organisations can feel unable to use the tools they are being given, but at the same time are not able to complain about them. Another common problem is that there is a great deal of 'mystery' surrounding M&E and a feeling of alienation caused by the use of jargon. This is hard to avoid, however, as the jargon is so widespread. Furthermore, staff believe that M&E is something that can only be done by experts from outside. This helps to explain why participants were hoping to be given the 'perfect tool' that would enable them to fulfil their donor's requirements for ongoing monitoring or impact assessment.

As discussions at the workshop progressed, it emerged that there was a 'mental divide' in the minds of some participants between the idea of formal monitoring and evaluation, and the type of ongoing reflection that they undertook as a matter of course.¹ The majority of participants were able to mention changes they saw in attitudes and power dynamics at community level. However, this information was generally based on ad hoc observation and did not appear to be written down. There is perhaps the perception that these types of observation are too 'obvious' to warrant writing down. It was also suggested that there is less of a written tradition in the African region. Lessons from the action research project (in Brazil) suggest that beginning to keep a written, central record of events, decisions made at meetings and notes of changes that seem to be appearing as a result contributes to improved strategy planning.

There were also discussions about the use of locally generated indicators that can be developed in participatory manner. This would counter the impression that indicators are imposed from above. However, presentations of one such example provoked discussion as to whether locally created indicators would be 'scientific' enough. Here, villagers who had been involved in a food security project had decided that one indicator of improvements in this area would be the number of people keeping dogs, and whether or not the dogs' ribs were showing. While some participants felt this was a positive example of finding locally appropriate measures of change, others disputed it: richer families might be more likely to keep dogs, for example.

The example of the hungry dog indicator is interesting, in that it is based on simple observation, but has been introduced into a type of system for monitoring change. Other participants were able to

¹ It was mentioned to me that one ActionAid partner that was involved in advocacy had not been invited to participate in the workshop, despite running a very effective campaign, because they were not considered to be doing any monitoring or assessing of their work. It was the view of the informant that the way in which the strategy of this partner had been thought through, and the way the campaign was run, that they must be undertaking some form of ongoing assessment of their work. However, this may not have been documented.

give examples of observations that they had made which suggested that their work had made a difference. But these were very much anecdotal, and personal also. For example, one participant's idea of attitudinal change in terms of gender relations was that husbands would now 'beg' their wives for sex, rather than use force against them. This however is not an indicator of more fundamental changes in power within the household. This was another example of an organisation where staff needed to think more clearly about the overall aim of their work, before finding a way to measure its impact.

A participant from Malawi suggested that one way they knew that their advocacy work was being effective, was when numbers of people involved in their marches increased. However, again, this type of indicator needs to be thought through (with some critical thinking) as it was pointed out in a separate session that people do not necessarily know what organisations are advocating for. They have been encouraged to demonstrate, but do not know why. Lessons emerging from group work stated that the most powerful advocacy was that which was clearly linked back to constituencies.

It was interesting that it was not until a plenary session on the 3rd day of the workshop that I heard the terms 'qualitative', 'quantitative' and 'triangulation' used.

The role of the facilitator

Commentaries had been prepared by three participants in response to the presentation on tools. These highlighted the need to be wary of accepting and using tools without adequate analysis of context and power, but also without self-analysis. One speaker warned of the way in which a facilitator's own value system can impact negatively upon the way a tool for assessment or learning is introduced. Someone without adequate political consciousness, commitment or training can misuse a tool and cause harm. Here she was referring to the use of ActionAid tools such as Stepping Stones and REFLECT that do not necessarily facilitate analysis of power and gender and can oversimplify social situations through a focus on peaceful resolution of conflict. The question asked was, 'is the facilitator in the right 'place' to stimulate others to think critically?'. Further, the facilitator is not just encouraging others to think, they must also provide information and enable people to aspire, otherwise they will have just affirmed that they are poor, rather than helped to examine why. The commentator finished by stressing that facilitators working with communities to assess ongoing work have a political role to play.

It is clear that the role of facilitator cannot be neutral, and when encouraging learning from and assessing of advocacy the facilitator must bring in new ideas. While they can act as a catalyst for change, bringing new ideas in at a time when the organisation is not ready for them can be disempowering or can generate resistance. It is therefore the responsibility of the facilitator to think carefully about when and how to introduce tools – to undertake a mini-contextual analysis.

Group work on change and how to know if we're making a difference

The questions posed for group work centred on 'what are you seeing terms of change?' and 'how do you know your work is making a difference?' and 'how do you verify that ideas and beliefs have altered?'

The problem of verifying what you are told about attitudinal change was put forward by a participant, who had recently undertaken an evaluation of Oxfam's community peace building project in Rwanda. This project aimed to combat gender inequality by putting women (particularly non-literate women) at the centre of decision-making processes on initiatives that would help consolidate peace within communities. Data gathered pointed towards very positive outcomes in terms of the gender aspect of the project. Women were attending and speaking at meetings, and the message put forward in focus groups, role plays and interviews was that 'women and men were now equal'. Despite this, the evaluation team remained sceptical that such radical changes could have occurred in a relatively short amount of time and with only a few weeks' training and

awareness raising work. Their interpretation was that villagers had obviously realised that Oxfam's goal, underlying peace-building, was gender relations, and were giving the evaluators the information they wanted to hear to ensure that funds would continue to be channelled through the project. Their next challenge is to find other ways of verifying information they are given, they may try asking for observations from 'insider-outsiders' – people who would be visiting and working in the community for different reasons, such as government agricultural extension workers. Another suggestion was to work with children, and through role-plays and other methods, get them to talk about what they see at home or in the community. It was also noted, however, that if a project is really bad, people tell you so, and do not bother to tell you what you want to hear!

Assessing work on child trafficking in Togo has involved using some statistical data, to see if trafficking has diminished – for example, looking at whether child enrolment at school has increased. But other measures are also seen as positive indicators of change – such as the extent to which people are talking about trafficking (sending children off to the cities is culturally acceptable, so a change in the use of words to describe the practice could mean there has been an attitude shift), and also the number of other organisations in Togo that have started working on the issue. When this particular organisation first started advocating against the practice, people couldn't understand what the problem was.

The problem of documentation was again raised, however, as, in the Togo example, assessment of change is still primarily based on ad hoc observation. The group put forward some reasons for this:

- Africans themselves are not used to documenting things that happen, and this can be seen as an alien practice.
- There is a resistance to formal documentation, as people believe they are being judged or pigeonholed.
- Organisations sometimes don't understand their own documentation (that which they do for donors) and so are not even able to explain it to the people they work with.
- Documenting work can be draining, especially if it is based on numeric indicators.

In response to these problems, some solutions were put forward. There was a feeling that Africans would like to find their own way of recording their work, possibly basing it on the story telling tradition. This could mean using audio or video and/or using drama or song. It was also suggested that at the start of engagement at the community level, these ways of recording change could be more informal. Over the long term, once trust is established, these could become more formal.

But there are some problems with story telling – there has to be some critical thinking involved in order to draw out the core of the story. Some elements of the story may be obvious to the teller, but not necessarily to the listener.

Stories can also be interpreted in different ways. They will often have a moral, but the way this moral is understood will change according to a number of factors, in particular, age and cultural background. For example, you cannot assume that all Kenyans will interpret a story in the same way.

Again the issue arose of having people who can cross boundaries - 'insider-outsiders' or a mixture of internal and external people in any evaluation team, which can help generate critical discussion of stories, for example. One strategy, used by World Vision, in the monitoring of some of its project work, is to ask village leaders and their advisors to observe whether or not change is taking place. This produces a particularly interesting dynamic when World Vision is raising awareness at local level to abolish or modify a harmful traditional practice.

An example from Malawi was of getting local people to do research on their own situation. Helping them to see their lives from the outside, and analyse them. With these skills they can start to assess changes in their circumstances.

In Mozambique, ActionAid is encouraging community members to help monitor the impact of a campaign to reduce levels of commercial logging by overseas companies has increased their awareness of the issue. Levels of awareness are noted by other ActionAid staff members when undertaking other work with communities – for example, how often the campaign and related issues are mentioned in REFLECT circles.

The session on knowing whether or not advocacy work is making a difference raised a number of very challenging questions, that the workshop did not have time to address:

Can you say your advocacy work was successful even if your campaigners end up in prison?

Or the bill you are working on is ditched?

Is it enough for ministers just to read your bill?

Is the amount of ‘heat’/anger you generate an indicator of change?

Does a backlash show that your strategy is the right one?

With work on gender relations there is no easily identifiable target – there are no communities of abusers. How then do you assess how far you are achieving your aims?

Other issues on assessing change

It was felt that there is often a push to look for the *big* changes. But much advocacy work will take years, even decades to begin to show significant advances. It was felt that smaller changes at the grassroots level should also be looked for, recorded and valued.

At the same time, with advocacy work, there must be a drive to get people (especially women) to aspire to more. So, whilst women’s attendance at meetings would be a good first step, this kind of small change needs to be built upon, so that women can do more than just attend meetings. It was felt that observation at community meetings (where people sit, whether they speak, whether criticisms and questions are put forward) is a good way to monitor changes in power dynamics at the local level.

Another strategy for assessing progress is the use of exchange visits. This isn’t just about helping people formulate policy and was described as a ‘powerful monitoring tool’. It was used very successfully by the research teams in Uganda and Brazil. It encourages critical thinking, as it leads people to make comparisons between their own work and that of others, and to think through how strategies used in a foreign context might play out in their own. It can also help people to ‘think bigger’ when they see that other people have similar issues (over land, housing etc) in other countries.

Frameworks

One framework for monitoring advocacy, developed by an international donor, was presented in a group session. However, it was felt that frameworks can actually serve to limit thinking, rather than encourage it. This particular framework focused more on (quantitative) recording of, for example, the number of activities carried out, rather than assessing the impact that these activities might have had.

But frameworks can help people plan their strategy better, and think about the steps they need to make, and in what ways change might emerge at different levels of society. It is only once people are clear about their end goal, and the way they hope, gradually, to achieve it, that they can start thinking about what they want to measure, and what types of tools and methods are most appropriate to gather the information that will help them continue to plan and carry out activities.

Issues of power

The question of power dynamics within advocacy work was stressed by the facilitators throughout the workshop. Above all, it was emphasised that advocacy initiatives cannot be analysed until questions of power have been understood. This is why the last day of the workshop involved a

session on power, and understanding how it can manifest itself in different ways. Participants were encouraged to think about occasions when they, personally, had felt powerful and powerless and to examine what type of power this was: 'power over', 'power to' 'power with' and 'power within'. There was also discussion of visible power, hidden power (behind the scenes) and invisible power (such as socio-cultural systems)

The difficulty of assessing advocacy was further stressed by the fact that even achieving policy change is not necessarily a measure of broader change in people's lives. So you can monitor progression of a bill through to becoming an act of parliament, but its impact is still perhaps more important. This highlights the many different levels of advocacy work. The broader impact of advocacy rests on wider goals of empowerment and the generation of a democratic public space.

Final Session

The following question was raised: do people do M&E just for donors, or do they also do it for their own learning?

In response, one participant noted that many organisations don't know how to do M&E in a systematic way, so they just don't bother. They will note down some visible outputs, and report on those to donors. Alternatively, they will perhaps 'borrow' tools from other organisations, without thinking through whether or not they are relevant. This is because M&E seems 'huge' and unmanageable, and people just want a way of getting through it. In sum, assessment tends to be a donor requirement and finding ways to learn from advocacy work appears to be a very new idea.

Other conclusions:

Informal assessment goes on all the time, but people don't document, nor necessarily look for the lessons they can learn from what they can see happening.

Many organisations don't have proper planning tools either, so they find it even harder to judge how far they have come. Again (as the workshop facilitators stressed) unless you know what you are looking for, you won't be able to choose a tool to measure it.

It would seem that the workshop uncovered a key tension in the assessment and learning from advocacy: tools are alienating and are being imposed by external actors but people are still demanding they be given tools. Further, partners are not getting the support they need to assess their work. They might be given a tool, but they need to understand how to use it, what it is for, and how it can help them.

The message of the workshop: be clear about what you want to achieve, reflect on what you see happening and challenge your assumptions. And finally, be careful about the use of the word 'we' when talking about people-centred advocacy work – your constituency should be central to advocacy initiatives.