

“More of an art than a science”: Challenges and solutions in monitoring and evaluating advocacy

Sarah Rose, February 2014

Introduction

How to monitor and evaluate advocacy work as part of development interventions is a significant challenge faced by many advocates. So what are some of the possible solutions?

Building on a series of papers, conferences, training and learning from INTRAC consultancy work, this paper aims to share and learn from INTRAC’s most recent monitoring and evaluation (M&E) workshop held in 2013. At this event, a group of advocacy and M&E professionals came together to discuss some of the challenges they face and share possible solutions from their organisations. In particular, we draw on four case studies presented at this workshop.

This paper offers eight key points that organisations should consider when designing an advocacy M&E system, as well as an annotated list of resources and reading materials. INTRAC uses these as source materials for training and consultancy work.

We do not go into definitions of advocacy or what advocacy might include, as this has been covered in other INTRAC papers¹. For information on these areas see the reading list below.

What is the significance of this problem?

There is wide consensus that organisations are increasingly incorporating advocacy and change-related strategies into their theories of change, recognising that pure service delivery can only get so far in tackling poverty. Donors are willing to fund this work, but with the move towards greater accountability, they are increasing the demands on organisations to show effectiveness.

Many organisations are struggling with the juxtaposition of trying to adapt traditional MEL (Monitoring, Evaluating and Learning) systems for the purposes of advocacy and encouraging busy campaigners to stop and reflect on advocacy work.

Over the last few years there have been a number of publications on this topic, including INTRAC’s paper entitled ‘Tracking progress in advocacy: Why and how to monitor and evaluate advocacy projects and programmes.’ All have made the point that assessing the impact of advocacy is notoriously difficult due to the many actors involved and changing landscapes.

Many of the same challenges are being raised again and again, and while there is more recognition that donor expectations are increasing, there aren’t many solutions.

Perhaps one of the reasons we are still struggling is because we are expecting a universal tool that can be adapted to different audiences. There is no such tool. The reality is that evaluating advocacy is hard. There is no magic bullet and systems are dependent on context and

¹ Please see INTRAC’s paper ‘Tracking progress in advocacy: Why and how to monitor and evaluate advocacy projects and programmes’ by Maureen O’Flynn, October 2009.

organisational type. It is more of an art than a science and advocates need to approach it logically and with a good understanding of their organisations' capacities and willingness.

What are the continuing challenges?

At INTRAC's 2013 M&E workshop, participants from a wide range of organisations including Save the Children, The Waterloo Foundation, Amnesty International, Oxfam, Bond, BBC Media Action and Norwegian Church Aid discussed the main challenges they continue to face and came up with the following list:

Attribution	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Advocates continue to struggle with assessing the chain of cause and effect and find it particularly difficult to measure when there are multiple organisations working on the same issue.
Campaign logic	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Often strategies are designed using instinct and assumption. It can be difficult to get advocates to think through the logic behind their ideas of how change will happen and what role their organisations can play.
Setting indicators	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A key concern is setting flexible and responsive indicators that assess the early stages of progress and intermediate changes.• Pressure from donors for organisations to quantify results can result in M&E systems relying on indicators based on arbitrary scale and rating systems.• The above issues often result in a focus on outputs rather than outcomes. Outputs are easier to measure and organisations feel they can have control over these indicators and will not appear to be failing when reporting back to donors.
Reporting on outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Goals are often long term and it takes a long time to see results of advocacy work. This makes it particularly challenging when organisations are working to five-year strategy cycles. How do organisations capture intermediate or lower-level results and changes, or find concrete ways to assess influence on decision makers?
Collecting evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Challenges include determining: what evidence should be collected and what is credible; how to collect evidence when confidentiality is a concern.
Capturing political intelligence	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Often political intelligence is shared informally but how do organisations use their M&E systems to better understand the political system to change their strategies and make advocacy stronger?
Organisational culture and learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The two main reasons for monitoring and evaluating advocacy are to be accountable to donors and stakeholders and to use it to learn and improve strategies. Organisations are not always honest about why they are doing their MEL, which means staff may not always understand why it is important.• Campaigners by their nature are reactive and fast moving and do not often have time to write things down or stop and reflect on strategies. Coupled with off-putting M&E jargon, it means systems are not embraced by the staff doing advocacy.
Donor expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Advocacy objectives and strategies change over time but current donor reporting structures place negative emphasis on deviation from strategy. Organisations therefore do not feel they are able to report on 'failure' due to the impact on future funding. Often this 'failure' is helpful for learning and the NGO community loses out.
Multi-country M&E systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• One of the biggest challenges is how to adapt an M&E framework to numerous different country contexts. Systems often have one reporting format, which individual countries all fill out in the same way. This makes it difficult to show change in different country contexts and across different thematic areas. These multi-country frameworks do not help countries report on reactive moments or on why objectives may change.

How are others dealing with the problem?

As part of the conference, four organisations presented examples of how they are responding to some of these challenges. Detailed case studies can be found on the monitoring and evaluation page of the INTRAC website (<http://www.intrac.org/pages/en/monitoring-evaluation.html>). In summary, here are some of the ways these organisations are dealing with the challenges:

Save the Children International has embedded an advocacy monitoring tool within its annual reporting system for country offices and members. It allows the organisation to collect a broad range of data from numerous countries, including the type of advocacy staff have conducted and the results they have achieved. This makes it an effective knowledge management tool.

Global Witness is an international campaigning organisation which has developed a planning, monitoring, evaluation and learning (PMEL) system that focuses on clarity in campaign logic and the impact of campaigns. The initial focus was on an organisation-wide planning week where campaigners presented their campaign plans and received feedback from their peers and senior leaders. The impact monitoring element of the system has been in place for a year and includes regular impact reporting and campaign impact logs, which record progress against specific indicators of change in real time. The strong focus on outcomes is critical as campaign plans often have to change and adapt to the dynamic external context. The system allows campaigners to explain the value and relevance of their activities and to tell the story of change. The system continues to be tweaked in order to respond to internal and external feedback and is tailored to the organisation rather than applying a best practice blueprint.

Amnesty International uses a theory of change approach to assess its human rights advocacy. The organisation has identified four interrelated dimensions to outline the broad areas of change it expects from its advocacy work. These dimensions are: changes in people's lives, changes in policy, changes in accountability, and changes in activism and mobilisation. For each dimension, Amnesty adapted a theory of change to determine how it might see change happen and what indicators it might use. The organisation also identified 10 meta-indicators relating to outcomes in three stakeholder groups: people whose rights are being violated or are at risk of being violated, target decision makers, and key channels of influence.

The organisation has simplified M&E jargon by asking questions such as 'What is the change that you want to see?' and 'What needs to happen to ensure this change?' Project teams use a web-based project database to input their expected outcomes, strategies to achieve the outcomes, and indicators that have been developed. The teams are required to report using this database every six months. The organisation then selects certain campaigns for a more focused analysis.

Climate and Development Knowledge Network (CDKN) has applied the principles and ideas of outcome mapping and married this with dimensions of change to report on the effectiveness of climate negotiation support. It identified five dimensions of change related to CDKN's theory of change for this support and used these as proxies of outcome challenges. CDKN then set progress markers at 'expect to see', 'like to see' and 'love to see' levels against each dimension, and assessed change during and after climate talks, recognising that markers may change. It has triangulated evidence from a variety of informal and formal sources to determine whether change has been observed against each progress marker. Since the conference CDKN has published a paper on this approach.²

What is the range of possible solutions?

An overarching theme coming out of the 2013 workshop was that organisations need to be honest about why they are striving for a solution to these problems: is it to improve and learn or is

² 'Supporting international climate change negotiators: A monitoring and evaluation framework' (Working paper) – Climate and Development Knowledge Network, November 2013.

it to be accountable? If organisations are clear on these questions, designing M&E systems becomes much easier. A handful of practical solutions include the following:

Organisational culture and learning

Critical appraisal

The success of an advocacy MEL system depends on the value staff place on it, and getting it right means being realistic about an organisation's type and culture. In the case study from Global Witness it was clear that the organisation was made up of busy activists. This meant that asking staff to fill out time-consuming spreadsheets was not going to work. Instead, the PMEL system was designed around what staff do best and defending what they believe in by focusing learning around a planning week when campaigners get to present their logic and encourage critical appraisal.

In established advocacy-focused organisations like Global Witness, it may be difficult to get staff to write things down. However they do not need convincing that advocacy work is valuable. In traditional development-focused international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) that have previously focused on service delivery, there may be a need to place more emphasis on justifying advocacy work and reporting on success. These organisations may not be ready for the critical appraisal mentioned above.

Small, incremental changes

If you are designing an advocacy M&E system, start by looking at the culture of your organisation and how you can make small, incremental changes. One simple step would be getting the person in charge of M&E to attend advocacy planning meetings. Another would be to start each advocacy planning cycle by looking back at previous projects.

Begin by capitalising on a campaigner's natural tendency to adjust and change strategies based on instinct and find ways of recording these changes. Utilise the rhetoric that good advocacy includes good M&E in real time, and build in incentives to help change where there may not be a culture of reporting. For example this could include resource allocation, reflection meetings, and praise for learning and adapting strategies based on effective monitoring.

Jargon

Think carefully about the jargon you use. Campaigners are activists and use the language of power, change, and rights. As such, the language of M&E does not always mean much. Rather than using terms like outputs and indicators, start talking about the change you want to see and the proof that that change is happening. This simple alteration to reporting formats could make a big difference to the quality of information you receive.

Design reporting structures from the bottom up

Lastly, consider working with staff and partners to design reporting structures from the bottom up. By asking stakeholders what they want or can report on and explaining donor requirements, you may develop new ways of producing robust analysis rather than creating additional systems that burden already busy staff.

Campaign logic and setting indicators

The majority of campaigning and advocacy work is designed using instinct and assumption; campaigners have a gut feeling about what may work and what issues to tackle. This makes them good campaigners and also makes M&E difficult but not impossible.

In the case studies from Amnesty International and CDKN, both organisations started by setting out a theory of change, identifying the possible dimensions of change they may see and then looking at possible progress markers.

Mapping

A possible starting point to an M&E system is to encourage campaigners to think through the logic of how they see change happening. During the strategy planning phase of a campaign, ask your staff to visually map out the various pathways that change could take and challenge assumptions at each point. The LFA (Learning for Action) Group (referenced in the reading list) suggests mapping out an advocacy roadmap, which could be a helpful tool for this process.

By mapping out the various pathways change can take during the planning phase, staff are also able to develop possible indicators for change. This is preferable to developing an M&E system as the last point in the planning phase. At this point, staff are tired and tempted to focus mainly on output indicators.

This theory of change approach also makes the system more flexible and it can be adapted and changed to individual contexts and purposes. It can also be translated into logframes but it does need to be repeated each time planning is undertaken.

Assessing your contributions and capturing intelligence

The challenge of attribution continues to be raised regularly and draws attention away from designing effective M&E systems. The reality of advocacy work is that no organisation works in a vacuum and it is unrealistic to try to prove attribution, particularly in the short time frames that many organisations work within. It is more helpful to focus on providing evidence for assumptions. If you feel you have made a significant contribution to change, say so – but be prepared to back it up with credible evidence and be prepared to be challenged on your assumptions.

Triangulation

One way to provide credible evidence is to triangulate data, which means using multiple sources of information to lead to the same conclusion. The case study from CDKN mentions how the organisation collects from a variety of formal and informal sources to determine whether changes have been observed against progress markers.

Encourage advocates to keep ‘scrapbooks’ that note both the formal evidence, such as parliamentary records or media articles, and the informal evidence such as anecdotes or gossip from meetings. Try to encourage inputs from people who are neither targets nor allies but experts. Transparency International UK invites external professionals to their internal campaign reviews to challenge their assumptions and review evidence.

Process Tracing

You can try applying contribution analysis and process tracing methodologies retrospectively. Process tracing aims to shortlist a series of evidenced explanations for an outcome. It aims to rule out competing explanations and estimates the level of influence a range of explanations may have. Oxfam has a thorough overview document of this approach, referenced below.

Capturing political intelligence

Utilise the collection of evidence to capture political intelligence and make changes to your strategy. Along with identifying the channels of influence and continually assessing if these are

the correct channels, organisations can use bellwether methodology. This helps to determine how lawmakers and influential people are thinking and talking about your policy issue.³

Multi-country M&E frameworks

Effective multi-country frameworks do not always encourage the best analysis of data and at worst they force staff to spend time on collecting data that is not relevant and never analysed. Multi-country frameworks need to suggest an approach for developing an M&E system that allows flexibility, as the example from Amnesty International suggests.

If organisations can build the capacity of staff to develop their campaign logic, challenge assumptions and identify indicators, and then allow them to participate in the development of reporting structures, the analysis will be more robust and there will be more ownership over the system. Essentially, staff need to buy into the system and feel it adds value to their work.

Donor expectations

The pressure for accountability means that it is difficult to find the space to be honest about failures, which are often important for learning purposes. As a community we all need to challenge donor expectations on evaluating advocacy work. Accountability and learning need to be brought together and we need donors to understand that reporting on failure and changing our strategies may be just as useful as reporting on success.

No one-size-fits-all solution: key lessons

It is clear that organisations are facing some of the same problems they encountered years ago when trying to monitor and evaluate advocacy work. One of the key lessons is that the way we approach these challenges needs to change. As one participant eloquently put it, the monitoring and evaluation of advocacy is more an art than a science. There is no magic one-size-fits-all solution. Instead, organisations are better off thinking through a series of the following points and questions to help determine which approach is right for them:

1. Be realistic about your organisational culture – do you have to prove the value of advocacy? Or do you have a group of passionate activists who don't have time to write things down?
2. Get everyone on board, educate staff, drop the jargon and think about the one or two small and practical changes you can make rather than overhauling the whole system.
3. Jointly design reporting structures with partners and country programmes so that these are meaningful and help you to assess contribution to change.
4. Be clear on your logic or theory of change and be open to changing your indicators/outcomes after and during your campaigns. Work with your donors to do this rather than failing to put in meaningful outcomes.
5. Make a judgement on attribution and back it up with evidence.
6. Triangulate your data by getting outsiders and insiders to challenge your logic and activities.
7. Collect evidence and think about process tracing to assess your contribution and your impact on change.
8. Challenge donor expectations – as a community we need to find a way of challenging unrealistic expectations.

³ <http://www.hfrp.org/evaluation/the-evaluation-exchange/issue-archive/advocacy-and-policy-change/evaluating-an-issue-s-position-on-the-policy-agenda-the-bellwether-methodology>

Reading list

Articles and reports

Tracking progress in advocacy: Why and how to monitor and evaluate advocacy projects and programmes – Maureen O’Flynn (2009)

<http://www.intrac.org/resources.php?action=resource&id=672>

This paper published by INTRAC is a useful overview of the M&E of advocacy.

Monitoring, evaluation and learning in NGO advocacy – Oxfam report (2013)

<http://mande.co.uk/2013/uncategorized/oxfam-study-of-monitoring-evaluation-and-learning-in-ngo-advocacy/>

This study on a selection of advocacy organisations and how they approach monitoring, evaluation and learning was published in 2013 and is probably the most recent overview in this subject area.

Monitoring and evaluating advocacy: A scoping study – ActionAid (2001)

<http://www.eldis.org/vfile/upload/1/document/0708/doc21800.pdf>

This scoping study was carried out in 2001 and marked the beginning of a body of work carried out by ActionAid to explore and develop ways in which they could best monitor and evaluate different aspects of this work.

The elusive craft of monitoring advocacy (2011)

http://www.hewlett.org/uploads/documents/Elusive_Craft.pdf

This paper raises a lot of issues and challenges and suggests that M&E should be specifically designed for each campaign rather than having a one-size fits all approach.

A guide to monitoring and evaluating policy influencing – Overseas Development Insitute (2011)

<http://www.odi.org.uk/publications/5252-monitoring-evaluation-me-policy-influence>

This paper defines the types of influencing as: evidence and advice; public campaigns and advocacy; lobbying and negotiation.

Toolkits and guides

A guide to measuring advocacy and policy – Annie E. Casey Foundation (2007)

<http://www.aecf.org/upload/publicationfiles/DA3622H5000.pdf>

This is a research paper that discusses the monitoring and evaluation of advocacy and the different approaches taken by different non-governmental organisations. It is somewhat theoretical and academic in tone but provides a comprehensive overview of theories and best practice associated with advocacy M&E.

Handbook of data collection tools companion to ‘A guide to measuring advocacy and policy’ – Annie E. Casey Foundation (2007)

http://www.organizationalresearch.com/publicationsandresources/a_handbook_of_data_collection_tools.pdf

This handbook accompanies the guide described above. It is full of different tools and methodologies for monitoring and evaluating different aspects of advocacy work.

Monitoring & evaluation of advocacy campaigns: Literature review – Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance (2010)

http://www.e-alliance.ch/fileadmin/user_upload/docs/Advocacy_Capacity/2011/11_EAA_M_E_Literature_Review.pdf

Published in 2010, this literature review was prepared in advance of Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance developing an M&E tool for advocacy. In addition to numerous other tools it references the Casey Foundation documents.

Advocacy evaluation guide – Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance (2010)

<http://www.e-alliance.ch/en/s/advocacy-capacity/resources/evaluating-advocacy-activities/>

The guide begins with a discussion of advocacy evaluation basics, such as why evaluation of a campaign is important, the different types of evaluations and general evaluation questions.

Monitoring government policies: A toolkit for civil society organisations in Africa (2008)

http://commdev.org/files/1818_file_monitoringgovernmentpolicies.pdf

Toolkit designed by Catholic Aid For Overseas Development (CAFOD), Christian Aid and Trocaire, with a number of data collection tools.

Advocacy matters toolkit – Save the Children (2011)

<http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/resources/online-library/advocacy-matters-helping-children-change-their-world>

This is an advocacy training manual, which has a set of simple tools for data collection.

Advocacy evaluation mini-toolkit: Tips and tools for busy organisations – Learning for Action (LFA) Group (2013)

<http://intelligentmeasurement.net/2013/10/08/advocacy-evaluation-mini-tool-kit/>

This toolkit has a number of useful tips and resource to draw on for advocacy evaluation.

Process tracing: Draft protocol – Oxfam (2013)

<http://policy->

practice.oxfam.org.uk/blog/2013/02/~/_media/C396B507E01C47AB880D7EEF9ECCD171.ashx

This provides a useful overview of a qualitative research methodology called processing tracing utilised by Oxfam.

Supporting international climate change negotiators: A monitoring and evaluation framework (Working paper) – Climate and Development Knowledge Network (2013)

http://cdkn.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/CDKN_Working_Paper-ME-Final_WEB.pdf

This provides additional information on the case study presented by CDKN.

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