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Monitoring and evaluating advocacy: lessons from Oxfam GB's Climate Change campaign

Simon Starling

This article examines Oxfam GB's learning from its attempts to improve monitoring and evaluation (M&E) processes within a global advocacy campaign. It outlines the Climate Change campaign team's practical experience of piloting different approaches to M&E, and the lessons emerging from the process. The experience suggests that while some 'traditional' elements of M&E are helpful in advocacy work, a greater focus on light, real-time monitoring systems is necessary. The findings highlight the organisational as well as methodological challenges of integrating M&E into advocacy campaigns: without a culture that rewards reflection and learning, improvements in staff capacities or data-collection systems will not be sustained. Indeed, the process of improving M&E practice mirrors that of an advocacy campaign itself, requiring analysis of power relations, opportunities, and constraints; monitoring of progress; and adapting plans on the basis of on-going learning. Finally, the article suggests possible ways forward, based on experience.

Suivi et évaluation du plaidoyer : enseignements de la campagne d'Oxfam GB sur les changements climatiques

Cet article se penche sur ce qu'a appris Oxfam GB dans le cadre de ses tentatives en vue d'améliorer les processus de suivi et d'évaluation (S&E) dans le cadre d'une campagne mondiale de plaidoyer. Il décrit l'expérience de l'équipe chargée de la campagne sur les changements climatiques au moment de piloter différentes approches de S&E et les enseignements tirés du processus. L'expérience suggère que, bien que certains éléments 'traditionnels' du S&E soient utiles dans les travaux de plaidoyer, il semble nécessaire de se concentrer davantage sur des systèmes de suivi légers en temps réel. Les conclusions mettent en relief les défis organisationnels ainsi que méthodologiques de l'intégration du S&E dans les campagnes de plaidoyer: à défaut d'une culture qui récompense la réflexion et l'apprentissage, les améliorations obtenues au niveau des capacités du personnel ou des systèmes de collecte de données ne seront pas soutenues. De fait, le processus d'amélioration de la pratique de S&E reflète celui d'une campagne de plaidoyer même, car il requiert une analyse des rapports de pouvoirs, des occasions et des contraintes, un suivi des progrès et l'adaptation des plans sur la base de l'apprentissage continu. Enfin, l'article suggère des manières possibles d'avancer sur la base de l'expérience.

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Monitorando e avaliando advocacy: lições da campanha sobre mudança climática da Oxfam GB

Este artigo examina o aprendizado da Oxfam GB a partir de suas tentativas de melhorar os processos de monitoramento e avaliação (M&E) dentro de uma campanha de advocacy global. Ele apresenta a experiência prática da equipe de campanha de Mudança Climática de fazer testes-piloto de abordagens diferentes de M&E e o aprendizado resultante do processo. A experiência sugere que embora alguns elementos 'tradicionais' de M&E sejam úteis no trabalho de advocacy, um enfoque maior em sistemas de monitoramento leves, em tempo real, parece necessário. As constatações destacam os desafios organizacionais e também metodológicos de se integrar M&E em campanhas de advocacy: sem uma cultura que recompense a reflexão e o aprendizado, as melhorias na capacitação de funcionários ou sistemas de coleta de dados não serão sustentadas. De fato, o processo de melhorar a prática de M&E reflete o da própria campanha de advocacy, exigindo análise de relações de poder, oportunidades e limites; monitoramento de progresso; e adaptação de planos com base no aprendizado em vigor. Por fim, o artigo sugere caminhos futuros possíveis com base na experiência.

El monitoreo y la evaluación de la incidencia: lecciones de la campaña de Oxfam sobre el cambio climático

Este ensayo analiza los aprendizajes de Oxfam GB en sus intentos por mejorar los procesos de monitoreo y evaluación (MyE) en una campaña de incidencia mundial. Se revisan las experiencias prácticas acumuladas por el equipo de la campaña sobre Cambio Climático al aplicar distintos métodos de MyE y las lecciones que emanaron del proceso. La experiencia apunta a que, si bien algunos elementos 'tradicionales' de MyE son útiles en la incidencia, también se requieren sistemas con un alcance más amplio y de tiempo real. Los resultados indican que existen retos organizacionales y metodológicos para la integración de MyE en campañas de incidencia. Sin un ambiente que premie la reflexión y el aprendizaje, el mejoramiento de capacidades del personal o de los sistemas de recopilación de datos no será sostenible. En efecto, el proceso de MyE mejora en la práctica cuando la misma campaña de incidencia refleja el análisis de las relaciones de poder, las oportunidades y las limitantes, el monitoreo del proceso y la adaptación de los planes con base en el aprendizaje adquirido sobre la marcha. El ensayo concluye con algunas propuestas para futuras acciones que se basen en la experiencia.

KEY WORDS: Civil society; Methods

Introduction

Advocacy, defined here to include both 'lobbying' and 'campaigning' work, has become a common tool to achieve change in the international development sector. Advocacy work by international NGOs in particular has become more focused and strategic, has made better use of the media, and has successfully tapped into political processes in home countries and multilateral institutions (Anderson 2002). Successes to which advocacy work by NGOs from the South and the North, often working together, have contributed include policy reform on debt relief to African countries, essential drugs lists, and the banning of landmines (Anderson 2002). However, while some form of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of international development programmes and humanitarian responses has become standard practice, less attention has been paid to evaluating the results of advocacy work. In his 1999 survey of 32 development NGOs involved in advocacy, Hudson (cited in Davies 2001) found that 18 per cent claimed to

do 'some evaluation', 28 per cent did 'a little', and 54 per cent did 'practically none'. Similarly, in a 2002 survey, 11 of 23 international NGOs claimed that they formally evaluated their advocacy work, but only four said that they did this routinely (Anderson 2002).

The apparent lag in interest in the monitoring and evaluation of advocacy work now appears to be changing, with a growing literature on the topic (particularly in the USA), some signs of increased resources allocated to it by NGOs,[1] and increasing pressure from institutional donors to provide credible evidence of results.

The challenges of monitoring and evaluating advocacy work

There is a series of theoretical and methodological challenges to monitoring and evaluating advocacy that have perhaps slowed progress in this area. These are now well documented (see Coffman 2007; Organizational Research Services 2007; Coe and Mayne 2008). Some of these challenges are common to development and humanitarian work, such as the following:

- the incremental, complex, non-linear way in which social and political change occurs;
- the large number of contextual variables that cannot be predicted or 'controlled' for;
- limited organisational resources (money, time) for monitoring, evaluation, and learning.

However, other challenges are more specific to advocacy work:

- Desired outcomes, strategies, and activities evolve and change in response to fast-changing contexts.
- Objectives can be more 'motivational' than specific and measurable.
- Advocacy work is often carried out in networks and coalitions, making it difficult to attribute change to a single organisation.
- Campaigns on global issues (such as Trade, Arms) involve large numbers of interactions with different target groups at different levels in different countries at different times.

There is also a series of practical challenges that face many NGOs:

- long timeframes, compared with the short timeframes of projects and funding;
- advocacy staff members' limited understanding and experience of M&E approaches;
- lack of practical guidance on approaches and methods of evaluating advocacy (Organizational Research Services 2007: 6);
- difficulties of collecting data from external stakeholders, such as coalition partners;
- challenges of working at national, regional, and international levels simultaneously.

Case study: addressing M&E in Oxfam GB's Climate Change campaign

Background and approach

Oxfam GB (OGB) is a member of Oxfam International (OI), an alliance of affiliates from 14 countries. The majority of its campaigning work is carried out as an alliance with agreed common global objectives. OGB's Climate Change campaign is a multi-million pound, multi-country, multi-partner initiative, which contributes to a wider OI Climate Change campaign.

OGB is developing its approach to the M&E of advocacy work through 'accompaniment' support from an M&E specialist assigned to the Climate Change campaign team. The aim is to pilot M&E elements within the campaign as it is implemented, to find out what works and what doesn't, and to use the learning to develop good practice for wider use.

The approach draws on OGB's prior experience in this area; elements of the organisation's Monitoring Evaluation and Learning (MEL) system; and some of the limited but increasing

literature on the M&E of advocacy work. It starts from the position that advocacy work is largely dependent on a constant supply of high-quality information (Nyamugasira 2002) and postulates that for campaigners and advocates real-time learning systems are likely to be more useful than summative *ex-post* judgements of success or failure (c.f. Patton 2008 on 'developmental evaluation'). The approach combines components of standard programme planning, monitoring, and evaluation, with several advocacy-specific innovations (see Box 1). These components will be implemented in the expectation that some will be found useful and retained, and others will not.

Findings

This article is written 18 months into the process of trying to improve M&E within the campaign. All of the steps outlined above have now been tried, with the exception of the last (the independent evaluation). Specific findings are outlined below, with learning points and recommendations identified in following sections.

Objectives

OGB's Climate Change campaign objectives contribute to the objectives of the OI Climate Change campaign, which itself contributes to OI's goal of Economic Justice. A number of campaign groups and sub-groups are therefore involved in the objective-setting process. While the 'super-goal' at OI level was clear from the outset (limiting climate change to an increase of less than 2°C), the process of agreeing objectives at different levels was time-intensive, with agreement needed from large numbers of stakeholders with different national perspectives, contexts, and ambitions. In such a context, more effort goes into getting agreement on a set of over-arching objectives than into developing Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Timebound (SMART) objectives at each level of the campaign.

Box 1. Components of the approach to M&E in the Climate Change campaign[2]

1. Agree specific, change-focused objectives.
2. Outline a 'theory of change', using a logic model (in this case the Programme Logic Model or 'Impact Chain') and document key assumptions.
3. Pull together a simple baseline from various internal and external sources.
4. Develop some tracking indicators for monitoring overall campaign progress.
5. Develop more detailed M&E frameworks for certain projects within the campaign (e.g. Sisters on Planet project, Climate Hearings project).
6. Encourage campaign team members to collect and document evidence on outputs and outcomes.
7. Review project-level monitoring information on a regular basis to learn and adapt.
8. Review whole campaign progress periodically and at least twice yearly through 'Monitoring Reviews'[3] in conjunction with key internal, and potentially external, stakeholders.
9. Conduct 'After Action Reviews'[4] of work undertaken to influence key events such as the meetings of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).
10. Independently evaluate the campaign to assess outcomes and inform strategy following the critical UNFCCC meeting in Copenhagen in December 2009.

Logic Models

The OGB campaign team went through a process of developing a Programme Logic Model (or 'Impact Chain'), detailing the intended outcomes of the campaign, and the causal links between the campaign activities, outputs, and intended changes. Key assumptions being made in the 'impact chain' were also noted. This process was challenging, because of the complex multi-country nature of the campaign, higher-level objectives which could be SMARTer, and the difficulty of getting the right people together for an appropriate length of time. However, the process enabled greater clarity about campaign outcomes and strategies, and enabled the alignment of OGB and OI objectives. The final product was a single piece of A3 paper, outlining the theory of how the campaign activities and outputs lead to different levels of outcome and overall OI goals. This diagram, although far from perfect, has proved its value as a tool for both planning and communication. It is hoped that periodically reviewing and updating the impact chain could be a useful evaluative process and contribute to improving strategy and tactics.

Baselines

A huge amount of research, analysis, and thinking by a range of stakeholders went into the development of the OGB and OI campaign plans. This included power mapping and stakeholder analysis, identifying critical issues, and developing strategies for achieving change. This analysis is contained within a large number of scoping papers, strategy documents, and power analyses. The OGB campaign team agreed that a consolidated 'baseline' report analysing the external environment would be useful as a basis for future evaluative work. An attempt was made to elicit this information from the team as a group, but – given the considerable energies already expended on planning – there was little will to put more time into this process. There was also discussion of the value of fixing an 'arbitrary' date for the baseline, given the gradual evolution of the campaign. The baseline work was later picked up by a researcher and MEL adviser, but the process stalled when the researcher was re-assigned to respond to a request for input from the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The volume of paperwork means that the production of a comprehensive 'baseline report' is unlikely.

Indicators

The Impact Chain contains interim outcomes, some of which could be adapted or refined as 'indicators' of campaign progress. The development of an M&E framework containing specific outcome indicators and data-collection methods was considered, but provoked debate on the value of spending time and energy on the detail of such an approach. Instead the team agreed to track progress on the key 'outcome areas' that the campaign intended to influence (such as EU policy on climate issues, and public opinion on human impacts of climate change). Team members would monitor progress within their own areas of specialism (for example, policy, media, popular mobilisation). Monitoring information would then be pulled together and reviewed by the whole team periodically to assess campaign progress.

Project-level M&E frameworks

Given the size and complexity of the campaign, several 'projects' within the campaign were identified in order to pilot more detailed M&E approaches. The 'Sisters on the Planet' project, itself a multi-country initiative, developed specific indicators, data-collection

methods, and assigned responsibilities for data collection. A range of campaigners, media officers, and marketing people across different regions became involved in data collection. Every three months, a pro-forma with set questions is sent out to staff involved in the project, to collect the monitoring data. A review meeting (or teleconference) is then held to analyse the data and discuss what these mean in terms of progress towards objectives. The first review was found useful by all participants in helping to share learning about what had worked and what had not, identifying problems that needed to be addressed, and building an overall picture of the project's achievements which until that point did not exist. This was motivating for the team and formed the basis of a 'newsletter' for a wider group of stakeholders.

Campaign-level monitoring

The challenge of attributing the impact of advocacy to any one organisation or action has led to calls to focus instead on identifying a campaign's contribution to any changes identified (McGuigan 2003). This requires documenting a campaign's activities, outputs, and any evidence of potential outcomes, as well as tracking the changes in the external environment which it hopes to influence. Our findings are that individual campaigners do monitor the external environment and their effect on it within their fields of expertise on an almost daily basis, although this is rarely systematically documented. Documenting outputs and outcomes across the whole multi-country, multi-partner, multi-functional campaign is a key challenge. One early innovation tried by the Climate Change campaign team was the development of 'logbooks' for each team member. These are notebooks (with a unique stylised theme to encourage actual use) which contain questions to encourage individuals to record evidence of their or the campaign's achievements within their functional area (for example, a Minister quoting an Oxfam statistic, or the numbers of people involved in a campaign action). The team can regularly review logbooks to stimulate discussion on achievements, identify learning, and reward success. However, as the campaign team expanded in size, this approach became more difficult, and a new format was tried. This involved building extra time into monthly team meetings and getting team members to spend 20–30 minutes completing a basic A5 pro-forma to record changes that they had seen, and any evidence that Oxfam had influenced that change. The pro-formas are collected and written up to provide a rough but useful running log of achievements, and a list of sources of evidence.

'After Action Reviews'

A key part of Oxfam's Climate Change campaign strategy is direct engagement with the UNFCCC negotiations process. An Oxfam 'delegation' is often sent to conduct lobbying, media work, and sometimes popular mobilisation work at key UNFCCC meetings. It is standard practice for the Oxfam delegation to review and report on what went well and what could be improved, usually focusing on activities and ways of working. The author accompanied the Oxfam delegation at the Bonn 2 UNFCCC meeting, to see if an M&E process could be developed that gave a better sense of Oxfam's achievements and influence at these events. The process involved a series of interviews with internal and external stakeholders, participant observation, and facilitating 'evaluation meetings' at mid and end points of the two-week meeting. The scale of the negotiations, with Oxfam one of several hundred NGOs and more than 4000 delegates, made it difficult to assess the organisation's direct influence on the negotiations themselves; but it was possible to document the contribution that Oxfam made and examine its relationships with key actors. The process was most useful in using data collected

to assess the effectiveness of tactics deployed, highlight and discuss key questions on campaign strategy, and identify learning for future events.

Organisational culture, management, and ways of working

Our findings indicate the importance of addressing issues of managerial and organisational culture in trying to improve the M&E of campaigns. These challenges include the following:

- The 'technical' language of M&E does not engage campaigners and advocates.
- Organisational reporting systems may be focused on output, rather than outcome.
- Knowledge must be managed effectively across multi-functional teams in different countries, addressing different targets in a dynamic context.
- Individual advocates' time is already stretched, and they may not see the value of investing more time in planning, monitoring, and evaluation processes.
- Staff may not be managed or rewarded to put effort into issues of campaign effectiveness and impact.

Learning about M&E of advocacy and campaigns work

Setting objectives

Advocates are used to setting ambitious, rallying-call goals (for example, *Make Trade Fair*). More work often needs to be done on identifying the specific outcomes that a campaign will deliver. Typically these will relate to changes in policy or practice, strengthened civil society, or changes in individual attitudes, beliefs, or behaviour (see Coffman 2007; Coe and Mayne 2008). Large, complex campaigns are likely to require additional levels of outcome (such as short-term or interim outcomes), as long-term outcomes may still be too 'high-level' for one organisation alone to deliver.

Using logic models

A logic model or theory-of-change statement is extremely valuable in unpacking how a campaign hopes to achieve impact. It is also important to outline the key assumptions being made about how change is expected to happen. However, models such as the Logical Framework or Programme Logic Model may be too linear in nature, lacking space for the long impact chains of advocacy work. Adapting these tools, or using a more diagrammatic model which allows for complex interactions between activities and different levels of outcomes, may be more appropriate for advocacy work.

Developing baselines and indicators

A great deal of research and analysis is often produced in strategising a campaign. Whether there is value in spending time to turn this into a 'baseline report' at a specific moment[5] remains debatable from a campaigner's perspective, although it would certainly be helpful for summative evaluation purposes. Given the nature of advocacy work, some kind of on-going timeline of key changes in context and positions may be more helpful than a 'one point in time' approach (see also Davies 2001: 46).

Likewise, the value of setting detailed monitoring indicators at the overall campaign level in a fast-changing environment is unclear. More important may be tracking the campaign's on-going contribution and any evidence of its achievements, alongside the key changes

in the external environment, and ensuring that this informs campaign decision making (see also Patton 2008: 321). The team's experience therefore appears to resonate with Roche's (1999: 209) suggestion:

> *[T]he monitoring of ongoing change in the relationship between outputs and impact is likely to be more useful than extensive before and after surveys. This suggests a greater emphasis on systematically recording ongoing evidence (both anecdotal and statistical) and making a reasoned assessment of past impact on a regular basis than on collecting data on a large number of predetermined indicators.*

Conversely, the use of indicators at *project* level did prove helpful in outlining what should be monitored and how data could be collected and analysed, and assessing project progress.

Collecting monitoring data

Ways of collecting data should be simple, time-efficient, and where possible built into existing reporting mechanisms. Simple tools, such as timelines or journals, can help in logging what has happened in the campaign and in tracking changes in the environment. Media tracking of certain key words, and even basic Internet searches repeated systematically over time, can help to track changes in the terms of debate on a particular issue.

Evaluation

The focus of much of what has been described above has been on monitoring campaign progress in order to improve its effectiveness. Monitoring work is likely to draw on external sources, but predominantly on internal sources. An independent evaluation is therefore important, in order to bring in perspectives from external stakeholders and campaign targets and provide an independent assessment of campaign outcomes and effectiveness. Timing of an evaluation is important, to ensure that its findings are useful and can feed into decision making.

Organisational culture, management, and ways of working

Despite the challenges encountered in embedding M&E into advocacy campaigns, outlined above, we learned that where campaigners have been supported to engage in M&E, they have seen its value to their work and in most cases become positive advocates for it. Our experience suggests that the following measures are helpful.

- Find simple and engaging ways of communicating key messages about campaign achievements and real-time learning, rather than the conventional M&E jargon.
- Build on existing meetings and processes, rather than trying to add new streams of work.
- Focus energy on key moments in the planning, monitoring, and evaluation cycle.
- Engage only those who need to be engaged at each particular stage.
- Build small examples of success in areas where there is energy, and share learning from this, rather than immediately trying to impose new top–down systems and procedures.
- Try to get M&E embedded into Campaign Managers' job descriptions and performance objectives.
- Experiment: it is more important to find some methods that work for the particular team and its context than to enforce a 'one-size-fits-all' approach.

Conclusions

A series of challenges, both methodological and organisational, constrain efforts to improve the M&E of advocacy work. Improved staff skills in planning, monitoring, and evaluation, and bespoke real-time monitoring systems and dedicated resources for M&E are all important. Our experience suggests a focus on getting the basics in place first – clear campaign logic with specific outcomes and areas to monitor – and then experimenting with data-collection and review processes to find something that works for the campaign team. Once basic systems are in place and operating effectively, their quality and rigour can be incrementally increased over time. Where campaigners find systems helpful in quickly generating learning that they can utilise, the systems will get the buy-in that they need in order to survive.

Perhaps more challenging within an advocacy-focused organisation or department is creating a culture that rewards time out for reflection and learning, and welcomes the asking of difficult questions about the purpose, value, and effectiveness of its work. Achieving this kind of cultural change can be likened to an advocacy campaign – it needs a theory of change, an analysis of power dynamics, identification of blockers and supporters of change, an understanding of stakeholders' needs and what will influence them, effective communications strategies, and on-going monitoring, evaluation, and learning processes. Oxfam GB's Campaigns and Policy Division, for example, has developed a two-year plan aimed at encouraging senior managers to lead by example and reward reflection and learning; refocus planning and reporting processes on outcomes; build staff capacity in planning, monitoring, and evaluation (for example, logic modelling, data collection); and work to improve information management and cross-campaign learning. Such changes will take time, and will need different approaches at different moments. It is hoped that eventually a virtuous circle can be created where more logical, specific plans will focus campaigns and make monitoring easier; improved monitoring will lead to more responsive campaigning; and evaluation will produce better evidence of successes – encouraging increased support and investment in M&E processes.

Notes

1. Oxfam International sponsored a workshop for its affiliates in 2008, focusing on the monitoring and evaluation of advocacy campaigns. Oxfam GB has recruited an Adviser to work specifically on this issue.
2. The components are presented in a logical sequence, although in practice the sequence may differ, and one step may not necessarily be complete before the others are underway.
3. 'Monitoring Reviews' are mandatory for all development, humanitarian, and advocacy programmes under Oxfam GB's MEL system.
4. Similar in approach to Innovation Network's 'Intense Period Debrief' – see Coffman (2007).
5. This may be more appropriate where there is a clear 'start' to a campaign. In the case study, the campaign developed gradually over time, with no obvious 'before and after' points against which to evaluate.

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