

Civil Society's Contribution to Budget Advocacy for Sexual and Reproductive Health: Findings and Lessons Learned from Three Country Studies in Bangladesh, The Philippines and Uganda

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In the past decade, civil society organizations (CSOs) have been adapting to changes in aid architecture, including external funding being increasingly directed through national planning and budgetary processes. 'Budget advocacy', aimed at influencing public budget allocations and expenditures, is increasingly the domain of CSOs and is also considered to be an approach to strengthen participation, transparency and accountability of government budgetary decision making processes. Based on an evaluation of three projects, this article discusses the contribution and impact of CSO budget advocacy to sexual and reproductive health allocations in Bangladesh, the Philippines and Uganda. The article identifies advocacy processes, critical success factors and lessons learned, and considers the contribution of realistic evaluation as a methodological approach for measuring and evaluating advocacy and policy change initiatives.

INTRODUCTION

The context, processes and financing mechanisms by which development partners are working to alleviate global poverty have changed significantly over recent years, driven both by the international context and by renewed aid effectiveness commitments. Traditional external aid budgets are under pressure and citizens across the world are demanding more transparent, responsive and accountable government. The recent Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation stresses the need for more output-based aid and robust results frameworks. Better value for money (efficiency and effectiveness) and accountability for both external and domestic resources are more important than ever.

Civil society organizations (CSOs) play important and legitimate roles in strengthening the effectiveness of resource use through advocacy, participation in policy development processes, program implementation, and enabling greater accountability of national programs to the needs of communities, including universal coverage and equitable access to sexual and reproductive health (SRH).

Significant changes are taking place in public budgetary processes in low- and middle-income countries. Until recently, the sector budget process was viewed as the exclusive domain of policymakers and administrators and treated largely as an internal and purely technical matter for expert consideration. This is changing as country legislators and citizen involvement in the budget process is increasingly seen as legitimate. In the past decade, civil society, including the media, have become more active in budget advocacy, in intervening in the budget process and in reporting on budget use and misuse of expenditures. CSOs are increasingly funded by development partners, including philanthropic foundations, as part of their contribution to strengthening domestic-driven accountability.

The findings in this article are based on three country case studies that draw on a realistic evaluation of the role and contribution of CSO budget advocacy to improving aid effectiveness and SRH funding allocations in Bangladesh, the Philippines and Uganda. The article discusses key factors influencing budget advocacy processes, identifies lessons learned for CSOs engaged in this work, and describes the use and effectiveness of realistic evaluation as an approach to measuring and evaluating the impact of advocacy and social change initiatives.

The country case studies were conducted after the implementation of an inter-regional project funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and implemented through the Reproductive Health and Research Department of the World Health Organization and the German Foundation for World Population (DSW) that provided technical and modest financial support for the development and implementation of local civil society budget advocacy action plans. For more information please refer to:

<http://www.hlsp.org/Home/Projects/CSObudgetadvocacyprojectevaluation.aspx>

EVALUATING ADVOCACY AND POLICY-INFLUENCING ACTIVITIES

Evaluating the impact of budget advocacy and/or policy-influencing activities is rarely straightforward. Advocacy and policy change is a political process, shaped by a multitude of factors (e.g. context, process, actors, and content of interventions or policy) and interacting forces between those factors. Advocacy interventions do not lend themselves easily to being evaluated through established methods and tools used, for example, to evaluate the delivery of services. Pressure to demonstrate results (i.e. measurable outcomes) is challenged by difficulties such as establishing causality (particularly in the absence of a plausible counterfactual), attributing change to certain advocacy interventions, and

knowing when and how advocacy has achieved “success”, as objectives are often modified or jettisoned along the way.

Various methodological approaches are being applied to overcome these technical and conceptual challenges. One important stream of thinking suggests a theory of change for social justice advocacy that offers evaluators a way of conceptualizing change and a range of outcomes that can be assessed in an ongoing way. This approach recognizes the long-term nature of achieving social justice goals and the need to craft ongoing monitoring and evaluation mechanisms that value *process* as well as policy outcomes.

Realistic evaluation, which sets out assumptions and ideas about change, is another approach to evaluating advocacy and to assessing the impact of short- and medium-term interventions. Realistic evaluation aims to understand not only the outcomes that are produced from interventions, but how they are produced, and what is significant about the varying conditions in which the interventions take place.

Other approaches eschew methodological developments, viewing advocacy evaluation as a “form of trained judgement”. To be a skilled advocacy evaluator requires a deep knowledge of and feel for the politics of the issues, strong networks of trust among the key players, an ability to assess organizational quality, and a sense for the right time horizon against which to measure accomplishments.

METHODOLOGY

A retrospective realistic evaluation framework (Box 1) was designed for hypothesis formulation (Fig. 1), data collection, data analysis and synthesis of findings. The framework established a theory of change that examined the pathways between contexts, mechanisms of change and outcomes. The theory of change emphasized what interventions led to which effects, how, and under what circumstances. Mixed methods were used in data collection, including individual and group interviews, observations, document reviews.

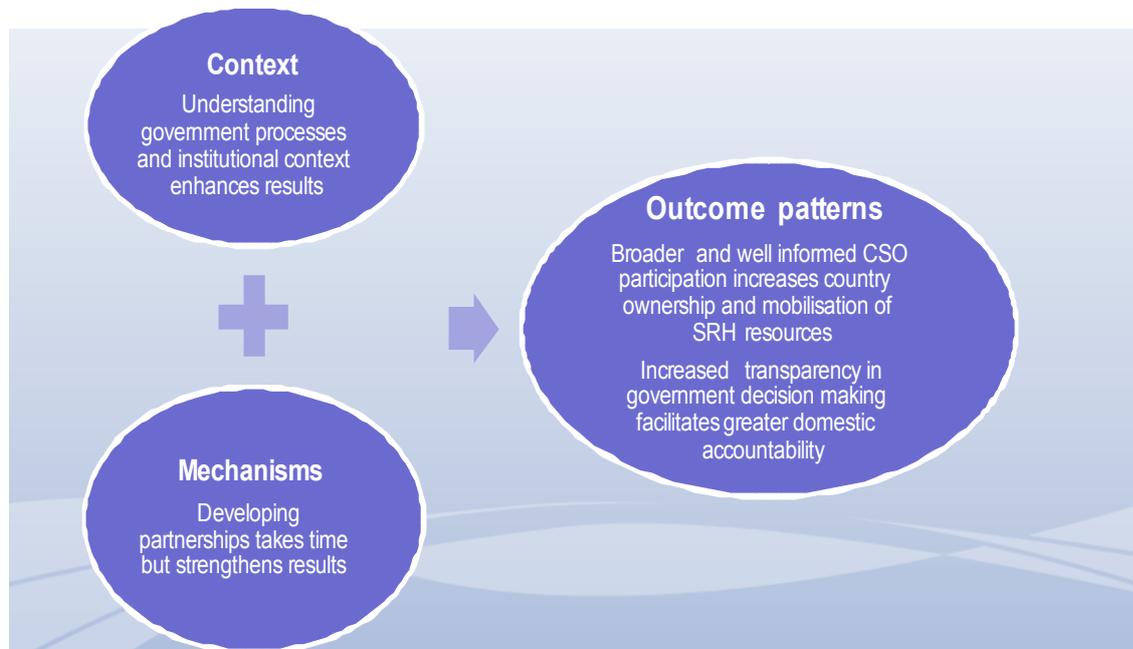
Box 1: The Use of Realistic Evaluation in the Context of the CSO Budget Advocacy Projects

Context: aspects of the external environment that affect the inputs, processes and outcomes of the project, e.g. the cultural, political, policy, financing and institutional environment for SRH, existing CSO capacities, CSO-state relations, and characteristics of external assistance programs.

Mechanisms: the tactics, processes or strategies used to generate change, e.g. developing or strengthening CSO advocacy coalitions, developing broader alliances with technical agencies and media groups, identifying champions and credible advocates, using existing mechanisms for greater CSO participation and ownership in government policy and planning processes.

Outcomes: the differences that the CSO projects have made or contributed to, particularly in relation to participation and influence on the budget process for SRH, increased transparency of budgetary information and processes, and increased accountability by government to its citizens.

Figure 1: Hypothesis



Semi-structured interview guides were drafted for different audiences. Interviews were undertaken in August - October 2011 by two

of the authors (SG, RL) in co-operation with a national partner in each country, with an average of 25 informants per case study. Interviews were carried out with the lead CSOs on the project, other CSO partners, and stakeholders targeted for advocacy and/or considered key to providing information on the country and policy context (e.g. parliamentarians, policy makers, Ministry of Health and/or Population officials, technical [SRH, FP, HIV organizations] and development agencies, media and communications organizations, and some district officials). In addition, data was collected through a review of national documents, project plans and reports, published and 'grey' literature on SRH, official national policies, strategies, reviews and budget analyses, Ministry of Finance expenditure estimates and reports and materials from partner organizations. Case study reports were drafted, and sent back to those interviewed and to the lead CSOs to validate the findings. The findings were discussed and the features across the cases were examined at a consultation meeting in London in November 2011.

Methodologically, the realistic evaluation framework proved useful in developing detailed case studies and increased the explaining power of how and why budget advocacy initiatives worked and under what conditions. Analyzing the links between context, mechanism and outcome enabled change to be explored between the countries, despite the complexity and diversity of contexts, and this increases the relevance of findings for decision makers in other settings.

Limitations with the framework were also identified, such as the difficulties of "retrofitting" a theory of change to a pre-existing project design and timeline; short and differing project timeframes that confined the evaluations to reviewing activities, outputs and their contribution to short-term outcomes rather than longer-term impact; and the nature of advocacy work – particularly tactics that value partnerships and coalitions that build platforms and relationships for change – which made causality and attribution difficult as successful advocacy is rarely the result of any one organization. Finally, the country case study approach, with its focus on a time-limited set of activities and processes, limited a wider assessment of transnational influences or longer-term evolutions in public policy that undoubtedly impacted on the country environment for budget advocacy.

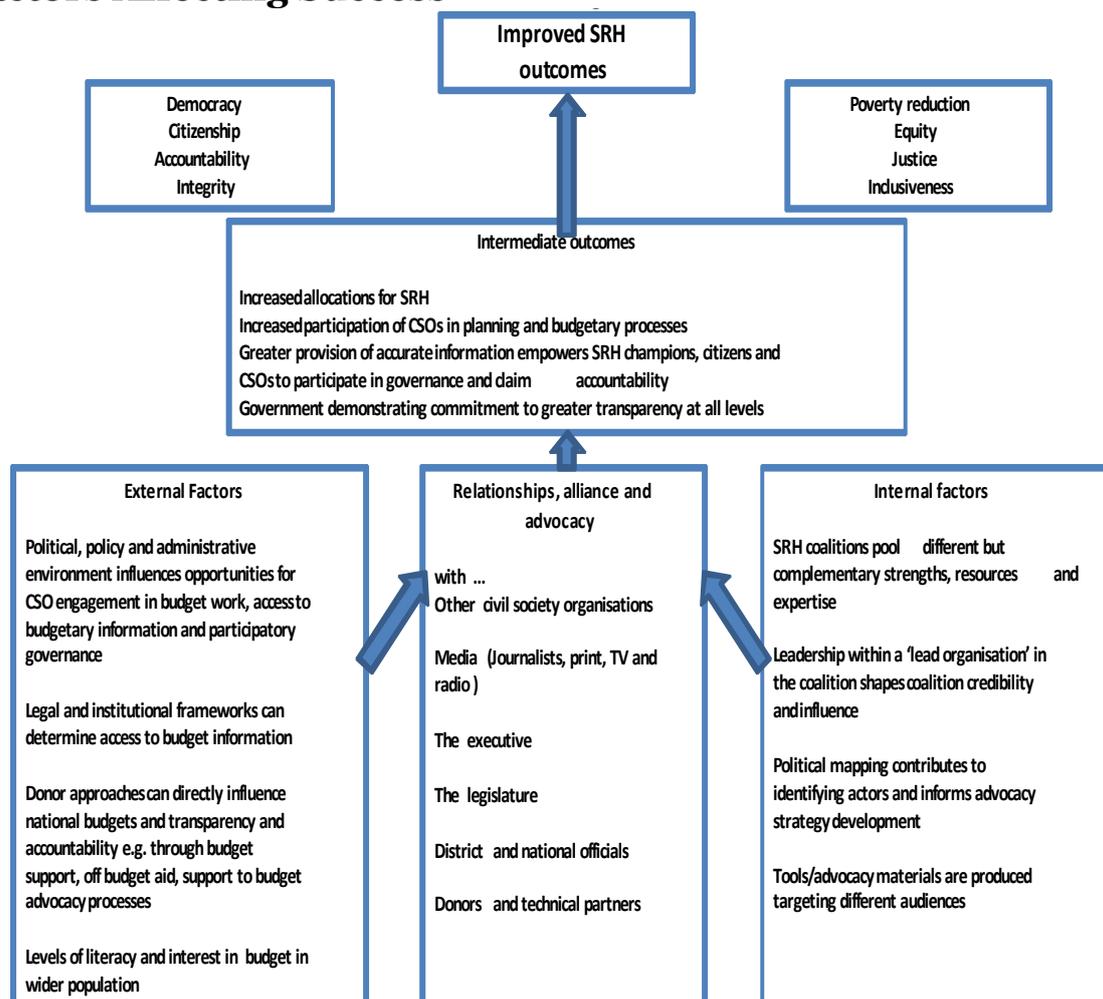
FINDINGS

Context was Important in Shaping the Success of CSO Budget Advocacy Initiatives

The case studies confirm that advocacy outcomes are, unsurprisingly, heavily influenced by the wider environment. For example, in the Philippines and Uganda, an active legislature which routinely engaged in budget debates and worked through committees to influence executive decisions offered a more receptive environment for CSOs to shape budget priorities, and strengthened participation, transparency and accountability in the process. In the Philippines, the country's constitution and Local Government Code of 1991 enshrines popular participation in governance, enabling the project CSOs to have better access to budget information. In Uganda an active women's parliamentary network provided continuity to and development of parliamentary advocacy on budgets over the lives of different parliaments. However, in Bangladesh, access to budget information was more problematic, a reflection perhaps, of a relatively weaker governance environment which is less permeable to citizen participation and legislative policy oversight.

De Renzio identifies four factors that fall outside the sphere of influence of budget advocacy groups, but are part of the context in which CSOs operate: the political environment and the opportunities for engagement; the legal and institutional framework determining access to budget information, the presence and role played by international agencies, and the overall level of literacy and interest in budget issues in the wider population. Our case studies endorse these factors as important in contributing to the success of budget advocacy. Other success factors relate to CSOs' capacity to form coalitions and establish relations with other civil society partners, the executive and legislative arms of government, and with development partners (see Fig. 2 and Box 2 for critical success factors and challenges to effective budget advocacy).

Figure 2: Civil Society Budget Work: Theory Synthesis and Factors Affecting Success



Adapted from “Budget Monitoring and Policy Influence: Lessons from Civil Society Budget Analysis and Advocacy Initiatives.”

Box 2: Findings: Critical Success Factors to Effective Budget Advocacy

- Technical and communications skills and high level leadership by the ‘lead’ CSOs
- A balanced and credible coalition, aligned on values that built internal trust and delivered on a shared advocacy strategy and plan
- Political and stakeholder mapping identified potential SRH champions, technical resources, wider coalitions and other influential actors with which to engage

- Consensus on shared tactics and common investments in activities that built alliances with policy, political and social actors
- Technical competency in budget analysis, and linking expenditures to service access and outcomes at community level
- Identifying and using strategic entry points in the budget process, such as budget hearings by parliament

A Number of Challenges Were Also Noted

- Turnover of key staff within CSOs
- Persistent weak links between national and local level budget processes
- A need to go beyond advocacy on allocations and budget estimates to track use of resources and to assess whether funds reach and show change at local level
- Limited direct voice of feedback to the community suggesting a need to conceive advocacy processes in the longer term, to build awareness and organization for the involvement of communities

Mechanisms such as Developing Coalitions Were Critical for Success but Required Investment and Leadership

In Uganda and the Philippines, the project CSOs formed SRH advocacy coalitions that pooled the organizational, technical, communications and policy advocacy resources of the CSOs involved. The case studies demonstrated that advocacy coalitions with credible, capable, and accountable lead organizations were more successful in developing relationships with outside groups and political insiders, such as senior legislators and policymakers within government.

The coalitions were stronger when members had different but complementary strengths, a presence at sub-national level, an agreed division of labour between members, accountability mechanisms, and regular communication and information sharing between members. The coalitions of CSOs tapped into their existing programs and processes but also invested considerable institutional and individual resources beyond those supported by project funding.

Change in national budgets often require advocacy to be sustained over several budget cycles. Experience from the three countries suggested that coalitions had to deal with a regular turnover of lead individuals, and had to balance the management of multiple, short-term

projects with coalition activities and more sustained advocacy efforts for long term impact.

Early Alliances with Strategic Partners Provided Access and Influence in Budget Processes

Political mapping and stakeholder analysis undertaken by the CSOs underpinned their advocacy strategies and identified important technical, parliamentary, district and media champions and allies for SRH advocacy targeting, outside the immediate coalition partners. Budget advocacy appears to benefit from this rich combination of actors, but their early involvement in designing the advocacy strategy was, retrospectively, viewed as an essential element for success, particularly for aligning the work with other ongoing processes and initiatives.

Advocacy processes funded through the CSO projects included training workshops (in the Philippines and Uganda) for targeted SRH actors at national level and sub-national levels; holding high level or multi-stakeholder forums including with the media (in Bangladesh and Uganda), and building forums for dialogue with members of parliament as a means of accessing budget information that would have been otherwise difficult to obtain (in Uganda).

“Interactions between MPs and CSOs make it possible for MPs to bring issues to the table, and CSOs help with research.”

- Ugandan MP

“I am grateful for being able to take part in the workshop. Before, we were just given the annual municipal budget for us to sign. Now we know we have to be consulted and I will insist that I take part in the next budget preparation”

- Municipal Health Officer on participating in one of the project-funded training workshops at local level in the Philippines

Alliances built with state, technical and other CSOs introduced new technical expertise, skills and information to the core coalitions. These were important in strengthening the technical quality and credibility of the coalition and in transferring skills to other areas. For example, in the Philippines, the coalition on SRH budgets developed an alliance with Social Watch, a civil society initiative that challenges national budget processes through the Alternative Budget Initiative (ABI). This alliance improved understanding of budget processes and access to government

policy formulation, leading to a longer-term involvement of the CSO coalition partners in the Philippines ABI Health Cluster on budget advocacy and policy. In Uganda, links made with technical partners revealed further work needed to identify bottlenecks in procurement, disbursement and delivery systems undermining the absorption of budget resources for SRH commodities.

CSO Interactions with the Media Improved Information Flow and Bridged Local-National Dialogue

Interactions with the media (print, TV and radio) as part of wider engagement with local and national leaders, including MPs, contributed to greater transparency and helped strengthen and communicate the links between district and national budget processes. Journalists were involved in preparing information products, in district training workshops, dialogue forums and media and press briefings in all three countries. Media reports raised the profile of the situation on the ground, bringing this information to national attention and raising social awareness and demand for SRH. In the Philippines, the advocacy coalition gave monthly press briefings, conferences and media releases that generated over twenty newspaper articles, radio news reports and television news footage, including stories linking SRH issues to budgets (e.g. on the reduction of the SRH budget by 800m Pesos during the Aquino administration) and challenged politicians publicly to account for election promises of supporting SRH programs.

In Uganda, interactions between forums of CSOs, journalists, MPs and districts opened channels for information flow. Links with parliamentary networks enabled the CSOs to access information on the budget and MPs were able to use the project CSOs to access useful budget analysis. Through access to media networks, CSO and political leaders were able to increase coverage of SRH issues. Through district dialogue forums, CSOs were able to raise the profile of the SRH situation on the ground and connect this with national-level processes through MPs and with accountability on the budget through a pledge.

“The media raises social demand for information. The issues that give rise to media sound bites are those the MPs raise.”

- *Officer, Uganda Health Communications Alliance*

The Outcomes of Budget Advocacy Included Strengthened Participation, Transparency and Accountability of Government Budget Processes

The case studies demonstrated that budget advocacy can contribute to greater participation, transparency and accountability of budget processes through many of the mechanisms at the center of the CSO budget advocacy plans - improved budget awareness and fiduciary literacy skills on the part of legislators and CSOs and deeper engagement in the budget process by coalitions of actors (legislators, the media, civil society and political insiders).

Furthermore, transparency was improved through the independent scrutiny, understanding and analysis of sources of data that were used for decision-making on expenditure priorities and allocations, and through more active participation in the budget process. Providing an independent and authoritative source and analysis of budget information and budgetary debates and making budget information available in the public domain, broadened the awareness, understanding and engagement in the budget process for many relevant actors. In the Philippines, CSO participation in national planning and budget processes strengthened government capacity to defend SRH related policies and budgetary allocations. Through links with the Alternative Budget Watch, led by Social Watch Philippines, the advocacy CSOs promoted the use of alternative national budget estimates to increase resources for social programs, including SRH.

“Since 2010, there have been better estimates to the alternate health budget proposal. Now, there is a wider range of voice in the budget process and (we) have better ability to defend our proposal to the public, especially the media.”

- *Key Informant, Social Watch*

Positive Contributions to SRH Financing

Evidence from the case studies in Uganda and the Philippines suggests that funding for SRH did increase over the life of the projects (although determining the percentage increase is difficult in the absence of baseline information) and there is evidence of stronger policy support for SRH in these countries, particularly at national levels. In Uganda, CSOs and parliamentary advocacy, better tracking of the allocations and utilization of funds for SRH commodities, and increased external funding for SRH have raised demand and opportunities for leadership and SRH funding. Within this context, the CSO coalition sought to mobilize parliamentarians to commit themselves to lobby and vote for increased government funding for SRH by 5% in 2011 and beyond. By

August 2011, five months after the project ended, the budget for FY 2010/2011 showed that Government of Uganda, UNFPA and World Bank contributions to the budget had increased, and that parliament had been actively engaged to negotiate and support these increases.

“We, as Members of Parliament, still pledge to advocate for increased funding for reproductive health in the coming 9th Parliament.”

- *MP, Uganda, Press Conference, March 2011*

In the Philippines, where the budget for ‘family health and responsible parenting’ tends to fluctuate according to presidential priorities, the increased budget for 2012 probably reflects the incumbent President’s pro-SRH stance. Significantly, the lead project CSO played an influential role in helping the current President develop a draft SRH policy for his election manifesto.

“Our philosophy is responsible parenthood. As to how many, as to what method to utilize, we leave it up to the couple, who can best decide.”

- *President of the Philippines, Benigno Aquino III*

We recognize that most changes in budgets and policy occur through a combination of processes and actors over longer periods of time, making it problematic to attribute SRH funding increases to short-term budget advocacy projects. Nevertheless, the CSOs have helped fill an important capacity gap, have contributed to kick-starting processes at the local level (or the national level in the case of Bangladesh) and have reinforced or added momentum to long-term and ongoing SRH processes at national level. In a relatively short time, the CSOs in the three countries contributed to increasingly open discussions with governments, parliaments, civil society and technical agencies on SRH policies and budgets, as well as mobilizing growing public debate over SRH financing.

LESSONS LEARNED

Advocacy and Engagement in Budgets is a Strategic Process

Project specific activities can create the conditions, interactions and information to support change, but for advocacy to be successful, CSOs need to respond strategically to unplanned opportunities and ‘quick win’ situations. Effective advocacy might therefore be better

assessed and achieved through a focus on “strategic capacity”, such as an ability to read the shifting political environment, to understand the opposition, to systematically build a strong evidence base and to respond quickly to windows of opportunity.

Budget Advocacy Needs to go Beyond Increasing Financial Allocations for SRH and Should Extend to Tracking Expenditures

An important constraint to increasing budget allocations in health relates to system bottlenecks that affect the uptake of services and perpetuate under-spending and low budget allocations. Budget advocacy needs to be matched with advocacy to improve the quality and uptake of services and to track allocations and expenditures at local levels. The case studies helped identify important connections between national and district levels, but increased and longer term investments at local levels are necessary to ensure allocated resources are spent, and communities hold local leaders to account for their commitments.

Off-Budget Funds Need to be Included in Budget Advocacy

The alignment and accountability of off budget spending for SRH (e.g. in Bangladesh and Uganda) can weaken domestic accountability as existing budgetary processes fail to capture substantial off-budget resources for health, obscuring information on aid flows. Findings from Uganda reveal that advocacy coalitions only focussed on *on-budget* funding for SRH (a considerably smaller share of the health sector's financing) and off-budget funding continued to pose an issue for civil society and national and district leadership in budget accountability.

A number of coalitions themselves appear to be built around specific projects and “donorism” – an overriding sensitivity to the concerns of external funders – can afflict CSOs, particularly those receiving the majority of their funding from these sources. In such cases, CSO lines of accountability tend to be “upwards” to the donor, making it difficult or weakening their incentives to get involved in national SRH budgets and how they are spent. This point illustrates the importance of international influences in shaping national and sub-national agendas.

Advocacy Plans Need to be Based on an Articulated Theory of Change

Without an articulated theory of change it is difficult for evaluations to situate advocacy work within a broader trajectory of social change and to determine the strategic value of project events and activities. Investing staff time or resources in clearly defining goals,

objectives and a project theory of change would help identify underlying assumptions and change pathways, assist with monitoring progress on multiple fronts, prioritize responses and encourage “continually rethink[ing] strategies” within the dynamic political context. Furthermore, comparison of theories of change, and the extent to which they are used to inform practice and are revised to reflect experience, could provide productive lines of inquiry for future assessments of this nature.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper is based on the findings of a realistic evaluation that sought to assess the contribution of CSO advocacy to budget allocations for SRH in Bangladesh, the Philippines and Uganda and to improving participation, transparency and accountability. The studies confirm de Renzio's observation that an understanding of context is critical to shaping the success of budget advocacy. The case studies also underscore the importance of establishing functional coalitions and alliances, and of strategic engagement with the media.

While the limitations of the study methodology are recognized, the three case studies contribute to an aggregation of shared experience that allows success factors and common challenges to be recognized. Realistic evaluation increased the rigor of our analysis and understanding of the complex relationship between advocacy and outcomes, and has contributed to the epistemology of advocacy and change. The study concludes that civil society budget advocacy can positively influence SRH budget allocations and contributes to greater participation, transparency and accountability of wider government budget processes. The studies recognize that influencing social change takes time, and above all, an openness to new ways of thinking and working together.

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