Can NGOs Make a Difference?

The Challenge of Development Alternatives

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edited by Anthony J. Bebbington,
Samuel Hickey and Diana C. Mitlin

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How Civil Society Organizations Use Evidence to Influence Policy Processes

Amy Pollard and Julius Court

The concept of civil society is not new; it has been contested within political philosophy, sociology and social theory for hundreds of years.[1] What is new is the increasing emphasis on the concept over the last decade – 'civil society' has become a buzzword within international development. All manner of claims have been made about the potential of 'civil society', and specifically 'civil society organizations' (CSOs), to act as a force to reduce poverty, promote democracy and achieve sustainable development. But how exactly do they do this? Are CSOs always a force for good? What is the proper role of CSOs in international development? How do they influence policy? A number of studies have responded to these questions, identifying a number of issues around the accountability, legitimacy and effectiveness of the sector (Howell and Pearce, 2001; Lewis, 2001; Edwards, 2004; Van Rooy, 1999; Anheier et al., 2004).

Meanwhile, literature on bridging research and policy in international development has started to explore these very same issues from a different perspective. So far, these streams of thinking have existed in relative isolation. There is remarkably little systematic work on the role of evidence as CSOs attempt to influence policy processes. Does evidence matter to CSO work? If so, how, when and why? Can evidence improve the legitimacy and effectiveness of CSOs? This review will attempt to respond to these questions by bringing together literature on the use of evidence in policymaking with literature on civil society organizations in international development.

We hope that bridging these streams of thinking may help to answer some of the questions that have emerged from the civil society literature as it has grown in prominence. Whilst some consider that the claims made

for civil society have reduced the notion to an 'analytic hatstand' (Van Rooy, 1999) on which any number of ideas about politics, organization and citizenship can be hung, others consider that the diversity of thinking around this single subject invigorates civil society itself, as an 'intellectual space for critical thought and action' (Howell and Pearce, 2001). Debates around the role of CSOs in international development have often focused on the nature of those organizations themselves. This approach has often made it difficult to pinpoint the influence CSOs have in policy processes, developing into a tautology – a definition of CSOs as organizations which work towards democracy and development makes it difficult to identify *how* exactly they achieve these ends. This chapter will examine how CSOs influence policy processes from the opposite end of this puzzle – taking policy processes as the starting point for analysis.

The Policy Cycle

Following Lasswell (1977), the most common approach to the study of public policy disaggregates the process into a number of functional components. These can be mapped onto an idealized model of the policy cycle (see Figure 7.1).

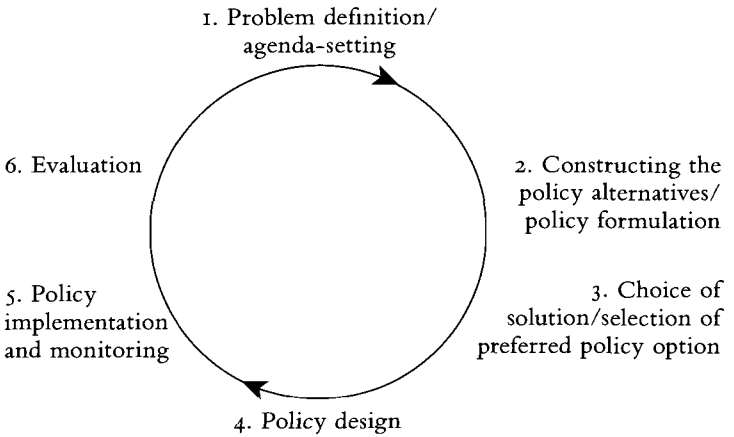
Whilst policymaking may not work logically through these stages in real life, this model does provide a useful entry point for thinking about how CSOs may influence different parts of the process. If policy processes tend to have similar functional elements, it is likely that CSOs will impact upon its various aspects in different ways. It may well be that success in influencing an agenda, for example, often requires a different kind of approach than influencing the implementation of policy.

For the purposes of this chapter, the functions of the policy processes will be simplified into four categories:

- Problem identification and agenda setting
- Formulation and adoption
- Implementation
- Monitoring and evaluation (and reformulation).

These four functions will be used to organize the literature in this section. In each part we will map the specific issues which arise as CSOs use evidence to influence different parts of the policy process, hoping to identify how CSOs may maximize their chances of policy impact.

Figure 7.1 The policy cycle



Source: Young and Quinn, 2002.

Identifying Problems and Setting the Agenda

In order to introduce a problem to the policy agenda – or 'turn the problem into an issue' (Young and Quinn, 2002: 13) – it is necessary to convince the relevant policy actors that the problem is indeed important and solvable. For many CSOs, being part of setting the policy agenda is a task which plays to their strengths. Those CSOs with practical experience are often in an excellent position to crystallize and articulate the problems facing ordinary people with whom they work. The key issues are often around how the understanding that CSOs have of development problems can be 'packaged' up and communicated effectively so that they gather momentum.

Building awareness

CSOs have played a critical role in fostering individual awareness and and knowledge – which can eventually lead to incremental policy changes or which can create policy windows. Whether they instigate opportunities directly, respond to them, or simply lay their foundations, to create policy windows CSOs must be adept at understanding and negotiating the contexts in which they work. In the long term, the role that many CSOs play in education may develop a well-informed community with the capacity to pinpoint and articulate development problems in the future (Arko-Cobbah, 2004). For example, Arko-Cobbah argued that libraries in South Africa have been important repositories for information on good governance, which

maintain the possibility for policy shift as enthusiasm on the subject waxes and wanes.

CSOs can also be much more proactive in creating policy opportunities. Fabioli (2000) documents the contribution of Journalists Against Aids, working in Nigeria to highlight the urgent need to address issues around the disease. To be successful with both policymakers and the public, CSOs need to combine personal testimonies with macro-level analysis – emphasizing both the gravity of the situation and the opportunity for action.

Combining personal and wider social analysis was also effective for the Addis Ababa Muslim Womens' Council, working to raise awareness of women's rights in Ethiopia. Mohammed (2003) notes that their meticulous community-based research was matched by detailed engagement with the text of the Qu'ran on the rights of women. Equipping women with this knowledge at community workshops helped them to raise the issues with both their families, communities and sharia courts. Here, it seems that established issues, knowledge and understanding can be an important lever to bring new issues to the fore. Ideology, religious beliefs and mainstream views can work in tandem with more challenging ideas – 'piggybacking' on the respectability of the former.

Framing the terms and mobilizing opinion

CSOs can be key agents in coining or popularizing a particular vocabulary within policy debates. Shaping terminology is often more than just wordplay, but is critical to which ideas and interests are noted, and which are not. Roe (1991), among others, has emphasized the importance of 'policy narratives' from a theoretical perspective. Thompson and Dart (2004) use the case of welfare reform in Canada to argue also that, through the discourses that they use, CSOs have framed the 'subjects' which social policy is intended to benefit, thereby framing the ultimate trajectory of this policy.

Many religious CSOs take this further, using language derived from spiritual sources to emphasize a moral dimension in policy agendas. They can create ideas that carry a sense of morality in policy debates without alienating those who don't share their religious derivation (Omar, 2004). Hutanuwatr and Rasbach (2004) suggest that Buddhist values provide an alternative to modernizing development agendas, providing a conceptual basis on which self-reliant, non-violent communities can form.

The concepts which underlie CSOs can be critical in inspiring and energizing their members. It seems here that the communication of evidence, rather than its empirical basis, is the critical factor for policy influence. Whether sparking a trend or creating a vantage point within a long-running discussion, the key is to coin ideas which have resonance within a particular social context.

Crystallizing the agenda

Some policy processes are tied to specific institutional arrangements through which agendas must formally be set. When it comes to interfacing with complex bureaucracies, donors and governments, the importance of evidence in the work of CSOs comes quickly to the fore. Many writers are particularly pessimistic about the ability of CSOs to influence 'high' policy agendas. Brock and McGee (2004), for example, suggest that trade policy processes are so dominated by the liberalization ideology of donors that CSOs lose any legitimacy in discussions around the agenda as soon as they begin to question it. The technical nature of the languages through which these discussions take place can also exclude those who might critique them. The value placed on donor 'coordination and convergence' is used to sideline CSOs from agenda setting unless they bolster the consensus view. Cornwall and Gaventa (2001) note that knowledge derived from more academic sources is privileged against that from CSOs involved in the practical provision of services. There is a dilemma here as to whether CSOs should respond to this by using more academic evidence in their work, bolstering its credibility, or find other ways to present their practical expertise as evidence in a more credible way.

Pettifor (2004) has argued that this dilemma places a particular impetus on the importance of analysing evidence well. She explained the success of the Jubilee 2000 campaign in raising the issue of debt relief through its ability to 'cut the diamond' of evidence – amassing a substantial volume of data and being able to present it in a way that makes the policy implications clear. It may be that the amount of evidence needed to change an agenda is directly proportional to how radical this change may be.

When CSOs are specifically mandated to influence agenda setting, they may find more success. Many poverty-reduction-strategy processes have made explicit attempts to fold CSOs into how problems are framed and which issues are to be addressed. Participative poverty assessments (PPAs) have been reasonably successful in working towards this (Driscoll et al., 2004; Pollard and Driscoll, 2005). In both Rwanda and Kyrgyzstan, PPAs were undertaken by CSOs, commissioned by the government. Both documents were very successful in setting the agenda for poverty reduction in an evidence-based way. In Rwanda, a CSO facilitated the 'Ubdbeme' initiative as an action research tool. This was based on traditional Rwandan practice of community self-help, and became a central feature of the PRS. In Kyrgyzstan, CSOs gained access to communities usually sceptical of government officials, gathering rich data on poverty in the country (Cornwall and Gaventa, 2001). Here, the question of whether CSO research is influential or not may be a question of whether they are included in policy processes in the first place.

There seems to be a difference between the tactics which are effective where CSOs are deliberately incorporated in the *process* of agenda setting, and where they are not. Where the contribution of CSOs is already written into the policy process, their work seems most effective when it is demonstrably rigorous; with an explicit method to synthesize public interests and views (see also Keck and Sikkink, 1998). Where CSOs must compete to influence agendas, this empirical quality is perhaps less effective than how they package their work. Those aiming to make more radical changes to mainstream agendas may need to make special efforts to be explicitly systematic and empirically rigorous, whereas those closely aligned with dominant views may have to position their work against a network of overlapping interests.

Influencing the Formulation and Adoption of Policy

For many CSOs, involvement in the formulation and adoption of policy is central to a mandate of 'representing' the interests and view of poor people. CSOs are often key in both outlining the different policy options and deciding between them. This role gives them status as 'democratic' actors. But why should the views of CSOs be taken into account? The major issue is how CSOs can hold a legitimate place in the eyes of policymakers, and also in the eyes of the communities they 'represent'. Another important set of issues concerns the political context within which CSOs operate. There is increasing democratization in many countries at the macro-level and many governments see CSOs as a legitimate and helpful partner. However, the context is less favourable in other countries where CSO activity may be actively discouraged. CSOs will need to respond differently depending on the macro-context as well as regarding each specific policy issue.

Working from 'outside the tent'

Some CSOs work as mediators, influencing the formulation of policy by influencing the process in which it is formed. Van der Linde and Naylor (1999) use the example of Kenya's Nairobi Peace Initiative to demonstrate the value of having an independent agent who can facilitate dialogue between two warring factions. This informal network of NGOs was able to act as a go-between, using their tacit knowledge of the area to disseminate examples of inter-community cooperation sensitively to build a process for rebuilding peace. In other circumstances, the political nature of evidence was critical in making it influential. An Indonesian CSO, lobbying to reformulate the government's birth control programme into a family welfare programme, deliberately integrated their findings on the effectiveness of this approach

with passages from the Qu'ran and Hadith. This inflected the proposal with a call to respect the interests of the Muslim majority, who had recently been under pressure from Christian, Confucian, Hindu and Buddhist groups. Drawing out the political aspect of this evidence made it more attractive for the government to act upon – because they could do so as a statement of support for Muslims.

Some moves towards 'participative' policymaking – involving local communities in decisions which will affect them – have had more influence 'outside the tent' than inside, where they were originally directed. Brinkerhoff and Goldsmith (2002) note that the efforts to engage civil society participation in macroeconomic policy have often had more success as an education process (for both civil society and policymakers) than as a means for civil society to contribute ideas which directly shape policy. The influence of civil society is 'softer', raising issues in the minds of policymakers, but leaving it to them to interpret how these confer specific policy options. This kind of influence is difficult to gauge, which has made the monitoring of participative practices problematic, and their accountability challenging (Driscoll et al., 2004). Accountability problems are underscored by the difficulties of getting the full range of community members to take part in participative formulation processes. Reflecting wider experience, a project in Argentina found that the most marginalized groups were loath to participate unless they could see the tangible and immediate benefits of doing so (Schusterman et al., 2002). The process of attempting to elicit their participation, however, did improve their awareness of the issues and was useful as a kind of education exercise. It seems that initiatives to include civil society in the formulation of policy have unintended benefits, even where they have less direct influence.

To influence formulation from 'outside the tent' CSOs must often be simultaneously persuasive to policymakers and local people. Where there is a specific need to act and appear independent, tacit knowledge can be a valuable tool to negotiate complex situations. Sometimes CSOs may influence the course of events in ways they did not originally intend. Here knowledge is not exactly used as evidence (in a deliberate and persuasive way) by CSOs, but it does create opportunities for individuals to apply this knowledge as they choose.

Working from 'inside the tent'

When CSOs have become formal participants in the formulation and adoption of policy, a number of questions have been raised over whether they are 'too close for comfort' with government and donors, who often control the terms of that engagement. Hulme and Edwards (1997) suggest that when bilateral and multilateral donors provide funding for CSOs, and

place these same CSOs at the centre of their 'good governance' work, CSOs quickly start to justify their position in terms of ideology, rather than any empirical verification of their legitimacy or performance.

Many have argued that those CSOs that are selected to take part in formulation processes tend to be those whose political sympathies and approaches are already well-aligned with donors, limiting the extent to which they influence policy in any meaningful way (Bazaara, 2000; Ottaway and Carothers, 2000). A related issue may be the funding structures of CSOs. Ottaway and Carothers point out that donor efforts to 'strengthen' the capacity of CSOs to participate in formulating their assistance programmes often risks undermining the legitimacy on which their inclusion is premissed. Lewis (1999a) concurs that the pressures of maintaining good relations with donors when part of formulation processes can divert NGOs from their primary task of demonstrating accountability to those whose interests they are supposed to advance.

Evidence may be a useful tool to deal with these issues. For example, the WTO exhibited a bias towards CSOs that conformed with the institution, neglecting its reformist and radical critics to maintain an artificially positive view of its policies (Scholte et al., 1998). There were, however, some CSOs which, despite their radical stances, backed up their views with systematic, rigorous and accessible evidence. These organizations were an influential minority, whom the WTO would seek out as representatives of dissenting views. It may be that CSOs can adjust their use of evidence to carve out a specific role within the formulation process.

Malena (2000) suggests that NGOs working with the World Bank fall into four categories: 'beneficiaries', 'mercenaries', 'missionaries' and 'revolutionaries', each of whom are involved for different reasons, and can use evidence to elicit influence in different ways. Those that take very adversarial positions (the 'revolutionaries') may do well if they make their views accessible with thorough and indisputable evidence. Whilst their views may not be directly represented in policy, they form a 'reference point' in the debate which sets the parameters within which policy will form. Those whose interests are closely aligned with the Bank (the 'beneficiaries') may seek to highlight the political aspects of evidence – acknowledging their stake in it and the potential for it to be disputed, to avoid being accused of exploiting their opportunities.

Some policy processes, notably PRSPs, explicitly require civil society to be involved in the formulation process. CSOs have often been critical agents in facilitating this. To take just one example from the PRSP literature, during the first Bolivian PRS, the Catholic Church organized a large consultation exercise, 'Jubilee 2000', which was highly successful in engaging the public with formulation issues (Booth, pers. comms; Driscoll et al., 2004).

Within Bolivia's diverse and fractious civil society, the Church was one of the few organizations that held widespread credibility and respect. Strong links to local communities and to the government allowed it to generate high-quality, well-evidenced contributions to debates on PRS formulation that were successful in feeding into the strategy.

Scale and rigour may not, however, always be enough to allow consultations to influence formulation processes. Maglio and Keppke (2004) describe how almost 360 activities involving 10,000 participants failed to influence the planning of Strategic Regional Plans in São Paulo. Whilst these events were extremely effective in galvanizing the energies of the CSO community, they did not capture the imagination of the elite economic and business communities. These elite groups acted through their traditional lobby in the City Council, where policies were officially approved and enacted. The absence of elites from the CSO activities undermined the credibility of these consultations – which had staked their claim to legitimacy on gathering comprehensive public opinion from all groups. Instead, the consultations became simply political representations of the interests of CSO groups, which eroded their legitimacy as part of the *process* of policy formulation.

These examples demonstrate that even where some kind of evidence is used to try to generate CSO policy influence, it does not follow that this will happen – or if policy does change that it will be pro-poor. It may not even strengthen the accountability of CSOs to the poor. Evidence can be a critical means to create 'reference points' for arguments within a debate, but, overall, the important factor in whether CSOs can use evidence to influence policy here is how well they are integrated within a policy process. A CSO which uses evidence in a rigorous and robust way may increase its chances of being included, but it may need to provide evidence of its political position as much as its competence.

If the political use of evidence matters, CSOs are bound to face dilemmas when there is a trade-off between promoting positions that are based strictly on the evidence and those that are may not be as supported or at all supported by evidence but which fit with political demands and realities. In sum, there may be trade-offs between influence and evidence-based influence. The nature of the political context is crucial to CSO strategy.

Influencing the Implementation of Policy

Many CSOs directly influence the implementation of policy as the primary agents responsible for instituting policy shift and making it a reality 'on the ground'. They may be commissioned as 'service providers' by governments

or donors, or they may work independently. CSOs can also provide valuable expertise to other agencies responsible for implementing policies. In all of these cases, evidence may be a valuable tool to make the implementation of policy more effective.

Providing services

Providing services is one of the most widespread, and also one of the most controversial, parts of the sector's work. CSOs are often well placed to provide key services like health and education – particularly where states are weak and/or where CSOs have embedded relationships at community level. There is huge diversity in the sector, of course, and many CSOs will not have the resources or connections to provide services effectively. Simielli and Alves (2004) have argued that the key to effective service provision can essentially be reduced to social capital. This may be manifested differently in different parts of the world, but at its root successful CSO services are those which create strong, two-way connections with a wide range of community members.

The idea that providing services brings CSOs closer to local communities has been widely criticized. A host of authors argue that when CSOs enter into contractual agreements to provide services with governments or donors, they cater their activities to these interests rather than to those of local communities (see Lewis 1999b for an overview). Foweraker (1995) has argued that even if CSOs have been successful in providing services to small areas, they may face problems in scaling these up or implementing services outside any immediate community in which they have roots.

Both Foweraker (1995) and Robinson and White (2000) argue that governments should improve efforts to capitalize on the experience of CSOs in policy; creating an 'enabling environment' where their expertise in implementation is translated into shifts in the agenda, formulation and evaluation of policy. Mismatch between the implementation of services and the other parts of the policy process is a major source of frustration for many CSOs. Whilst CSOs have a great direct influence on policy as a course of action, this work is often disconnected from any influence over policy as a plan of action. CSOs often find problems in translating their practical knowledge and experience into evidence which can inform the shape and direction of future policy.

Technical assistance

Many CSOs do not play a practical part in implementing policy themselves, but do offer technical advice and expertise on how it might be implemented better. Think-tanks have become a growing part of this sector, often acting as a bridge between those with practical experience of implementation and

those with responsibility for policymaking. Booth suggests that in Bolivia the key to the success of the think-tank sector has been bridging these two communities (Booth, pers. comms). During the PRS process, several think-tanks mediated a rather antagonistic relationship between grassroots CSOs and government agencies. They have provided clear and independent explanations of the process for both groups, taking much of the heat from their discussions to isolate the key issues for debate. Lewer (1999) warns that groups with access to 'technical' evidence must be careful not to create hierarchies that exclude other kinds of evidence, such as the views and experiences of local communities.

Issues of hierarchy often seem to arise around 'capacity building' efforts. These are another key way that CSOs with technical expertise contribute to the implementation of policy, by facilitating the development of those CSOs that are responsible for implementation. Many capacity-building CSOs might shy away from aiming to 'influence policy' themselves – in this role they work to facilitate the influence of others, not to steer what that influence might be. To take another example from Bolivia, INGOs came under great pressure to avoid 'interfering' with local politics whilst ensuring that local community monitoring systems were not dominated by patronage (Driscoll et al., 2004). Here, it was difficult for INGOs to use their understanding of 'what works' in monitoring systems directly as evidence, as they were not seen as having a right to do this. Instead, this understanding had to be used in a tacit form, to underpin the process through which they worked and ensure that the appropriate parties had all full information and opportunities to make decisions. This demonstrates the need for a 'people-centred' approach to capacity building, focusing on the personal and cultural challenges involved, and that technical 'experts' need to be more adept at *asking* questions than *knowing* the answers (James, 2002).

Those contributing to implementation through technical assistance must be as adept in using their knowledge in an appropriate way. To ensure that technical understanding does not dominate the knowledge of others, they must foster a 'learning approach', and be able to translate their expertise into tacit, implicit as well as explicit, forms. These skills may help CSOs involved with technical assistance to negotiate delicate relationships in their work.

Independent action

Some CSOs have sidestepped all these problems by simply getting on with the job of changing their communities, and paying no attention to whether this is acknowledged in 'official' policy spheres. Bayat (1997) notes that the most effective means for CSOs in the Middle East to change the course of events on the ground has been through direct action – as he puts it, 'the

quiet encroachment of the ordinary'. This has been far more successful than demand-led social movements, which have been dogged by clientelism and hierarchy. Here, direct action has created realities on the ground which authorities will 'sooner or later' have to adjust their policies to suit.

A similar case demonstrates how evidence may be important in improving the effectiveness of independent action. Young (et al., 2003) found that independent veterinarians working to provide illegal, but highly effective, animal care in Kenya relied heavily on sharing evidence to do their work. Workshops bringing together qualified vets with those with basic training were critical forums to share and solve problems, monitor the success of the scheme and allow it to grow. Whilst sharing evidence was key in allowing the scheme to be effective, it did little to help it become legitimate, and policymakers were roundly dismissive of the initiative. Here, evidence was highly influential on policy as a course of action, but dislocated from policy as legislation, largely due to the contextual factors at play.

This section brings out three broader points regarding evidence and policy implementation. First, expertise can help improve service delivery. Second, the sharing of experience on the ground – promoting 'seeing is believing' – can be very convincing for policy change. Third, there seem to be needs for more effective ways to link implementation experiences with other parts of the policy process.

Monitoring and Evaluating Policy

Evidence is an intrinsic element of monitoring and evaluation, which must invariably synthesize and analyse information to substantiate judgements on the successes and failures of policies. The effectiveness of CSOs in influencing evaluation processes depends on two factors: whether they can gather and use evidence to make a sound assessment of policy; and whether they can use evidence to demonstrate their legitimacy in doing this.

Promoting information availability and transparency

CSOs have a key role in making information on policy publicly available and in an accessible format. Where they retain independence from the state, media organizations have often led the CSO community in this task. The advance of the Internet has enabled groups such as One World and IPS to become global hubs for the civil society media, publishing stories on a wide range of development issues, and creating opportunities for both large and small groups to publish informative reports, commentary and opinion pieces. Placing policy within the public domain has historically been the main contribution of the media to democracy, and is fiercely protected by groups such as AMARC, the association for community radio broadcasters.

They have successfully used media campaigns to hold the Brazilian government to account over their closure of the Porto Alegre independent radio station. While the role of the media in monitoring is frequently asserted, there is a lack of research assessing its impact on policy in any systematic manner.

Those CSOs more oriented around research have often played a part in synthesizing information so that it can be used as evidence. Tracing the success of Mexican activists in critiquing the World Bank, Fox (2001) argues that the lack of good-quality information on institutional performance has allowed independent advocacy groups to gain great leverage through their own monitoring work. In other contexts, the independence of CSOs combined with reputable expertise has been critical to the success in monitoring. There are numerous other agencies, often based in the North, which provide centres for monitoring information. One of the most successful has been the International Budget Project (IBP), which helps to facilitate CSOs in developing countries to analyse and influence budgets (e.g. Mwenda and Gachocho, 2003).

Promoting transparency depends on a CSO's ability to use clear, conclusive and easily accessible evidence which explicitly proves a point to a wide audience. Policy impact depends on how far the evidence is communicated – when an issue is highly 'exposed' in itself this creates pressure for change. High exposure is likely to come from an agency which is well-networked, reputable and high status. These agencies can act as conduits for less-well-resourced CSOs.

Participative monitoring

Whilst promoting transparency is perhaps most effectively performed by large 'elite' CSOs – the best networked media organizations and the most reputable research groups – a much wider variety of groups can be successful in 'participative monitoring'. Participation in monitoring and evaluation has been a relatively recent addition to the 'participation paradigm', which has gained momentum in development in recent years (Driscoll et al., 2004). Some have argued that when CSOs are involved in evaluation they will find greater parity with those who contract them to provide services (Cornwall and Gaventa, 2001). The major difference between participative monitoring and conventional evaluation techniques is that local people collaborate with development agencies and policymakers to decide what constitutes successful policy, and what indicators might demonstrate this success (Guijt et al., 1998). It requires a greater emphasis on negotiation, learning and flexibility between these agents – which has translated into a focus on the processes that must be undertaken to incorporate the views of different parties.

The key issues for whether CSOs are successful in influencing participative monitoring seem to be process and timing. Krafchik (2003) notes that whilst civil-society organizations are making effective contributions to the formulation of budgets in developing countries, the timing of auditing processes gives them little incentive to scrutinize these budgets once they are spent. Audit reports are usually presented two years after the close of the financial year, at a time when other budgeting issues compete for CSO attention. By this time, in the fluid structures of many CSOs, the relevant individual and institutional knowledge of this spending may have been lost.

If process is the key to participative monitoring, the way to maximize CSOs' chances of influence may be to build good learning processes internally. Developing better institutional memory can be an effective means to ensure that past events are analysed, referred to and followed up. This allows CSOs to draw on their full range of available knowledge, allowing it to be capitalized on as evidence.

Reflective practice

Another major theme in CSO influence on monitoring and evaluation is how these tools can be turned on CSOs themselves. As we have touched on earlier, the CSO sector, and particularly the NGOs within it, has come under increasing pressure to raise the standard of its own monitoring procedures. This is a key element to improving CSO work in service provision, but also in ensuring that work in advocacy and mediation is done on a sound basis. Many argue that the measurement and improvement of accountability goes hand in hand with the measurement and improvement of CSO influence. In order to enhance their influence on policy, CSOs need to demonstrate more clearly their sources of legitimacy. Macdonald (2004) proposes that the sector develops 'fluid mechanisms for institutional authorization', which may involve monitoring NGO representatives and holding them accountable.

Providing evidence of legitimacy seems to be critical to policy influence for many CSOs, often those working on advocacy – which need to demonstrate that their arguments are reflections of the interest groups they represent. It may also be critical for the effectiveness of CSOs working to provide services, which must be sure that they have the confidence of the communities they serve, and to substantiate the position of those that offer technical assistance, like think-tanks, to show their advice is given on the basis of real expertise (Pettifor, 2004). In other circumstances, CSO influence is not necessarily contingent on providing any evidence that influence is deserved. In fact, some CSOs seem to manage rather well without it.

So, reflective practice may not necessarily determine whether CSOs will have influence, although it may help others determine how desirable they

judge any influence to be. The key question, then, is who is doing the judging? It may be that different kinds of evidence are required to legitimate CSO practice to different audiences, and for some audiences evidence is not necessarily important in the short term.

Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the role of evidence as CSOs attempt to influence policy processes. The aim has been to try to synthesize the patchy literature, draw lessons and identify areas for future work. Overall, it seems clear that using evidence effectively can be critical to the success of CSOs in influencing policy, but it is often *how* evidence is used, rather than the nature of evidence itself, which is the critical factor.

Evidence does not always work in a way that is straightforward, obvious or 'rational'. For many CSOs, making evidence rigorous and accessible is the first step for maximizing their chances of policy influence. Clearly, though, the context in which CSOs operate and the relationships between different actors in a policy arena is often at least as important as whether evidence is robust.

If CSOs are to use evidence to bring about pro-poor policy they need to do three main things, which will of course differ according to the social and political context:

- *Inspire*: to generate support for an issue or action; to raise new ideas or question old ones; to create new ways of framing an issue or 'policy narratives'.
- *Inform*: to represent the views of others; to share expertise and experience; to put forward new approaches.
- *Improve*: to add, correct or change policy issues; to hold policymakers accountable; to evaluate and improve their own activities, particularly regarding service provision; to learn from each other.

This is much more easily said than done, and reality is of course much more complex. Rather than focus on the nature of those organizations themselves or take CSOs as the starting point, we have taken the key elements of policy processes (agenda setting; formulation; implementation; monitoring and evaluation) as the starting point for analysis. We focus on how CSOs contribute to different components of the policy process and how they use evidence in their efforts.

To influence *agenda setting*, it seems that the key factor is the way evidence is communicated by CSOs. They may need to generate or crystallize a body of evidence as a policy narrative around a problem or issue. This can help

Table 7.1 What matters for influencing the key components of policy processes?

Component of the policy process/ aspects of evidence	Agenda setting	Formulation	Implementation	Monitoring and evaluation
Availability		•		•
Credibility		•		
Generalizability			•	
Rootedness	•	•	•	•
Relevance		•	•	•
Accessibility (communication)	•			•

create a window for policy change. However, CSOs often use evidence to build momentum behind an idea, until it reaches a 'tipping point' and becomes widely accepted. They will need to use credible evidence if they are to establish themselves as legitimate actors.

To influence the *formulation* of policy, evidence can be an important way to establish the credibility of CSOs. Here, the quantity and quality credibility of the evidence which CSOs use seems to be important for their policy influence. CSOs need to be adept at adapting the way they use evidence to maintain credibility with local communities and with policymakers, combining their tacit and explicit knowledge of a policy context. CSOs may need to present evidence of their political position, as much as their competence, in order to be included within formulation discussion.

To influence the *implementation* of policy, evidence is critical to improving the effectiveness of development initiatives. For many CSOs involved in providing services and implementing policy directly, a key issue has been translating their practical knowledge and expertise into evidence which can be shared with others. Capitalizing on the practical knowledge and experience of many CSOs can require careful analytic work to understand how technical skills, expert knowledge and practical experience can inform one another. The key to influencing the implementation of policy is to demonstrate the operational relevance of evidence and to make such evidence relevant across different contexts.

To influence the *monitoring and evaluation* of policy, the key factors seem to be to generate relevant information and to communicate evidence in a clear, conclusive and accessible way (whether internally within CSOs or to external policymakers). Many CSOs have pioneered participative processes

which transform the views of ordinary people into indicators and measures which can make policy processes accountable. Others focus much more on empirical approaches to address issues of relevance. Direct communication with policymakers regarding the impact of their policies is often the key to influence in this arena of the policy process. However, may CSOs have often been influential by gaining high media 'exposure' for their policy critiques.

Stripped down, then, the issues emerging in each part of the policy process can be mapped against the five different aspects of evidence which matter for policy influence (see Table 7.1).

Recommendations

Taken as a whole, our review suggests seven main ways that CSOs could use evidence to improve their chances of policy influence:

1. *Legitimacy* Legitimacy matters for policy influence. Evidence can especially be used to enhance the technical sources of legitimacy of CSOs, but also their representative, moral or legal legitimacy. Making their legitimacy explicit can help others make decisions about whether they wish to endorse CSO work. Linked to this is a more general point that CSOs are more likely to have an impact if they work together.
2. *Effectiveness* Evidence can be used to make CSO work more effective. Gathering evidence can be a tool for CSOs to evaluate and improve the impact of their work, share lessons with others, and capture the institutional memory and knowledge held within organizations.
3. *Integration* There is often disconnect between CSO work on implementation or service delivery and the rest of the policy process. CSOs can have greater influence if they find better ways to turn their practical knowledge and expertise into evidence which can be used to inform other parts of the policy process (agenda setting, formulation and evaluation). This could also help improve the learning which occurs across CSOs.
4. *Translation* Expert evidence should not be used to 'trump' the perspectives and experience of ordinary people. CSOs should find ways to turn peoples' understanding into legitimate evidence and to combine community wisdom with expert evidence.
5. *Access* Access to policymaking processes is vital for CSOs to use evidence to influence policy. Examples in the paper indicate that the question of whether CSO research is influential or not is often a question of whether they are included in policy processes and can respond accordingly. Evidence can help CSOs gain better access to policy arenas.
6. *Credibility* Evidence must be valid, reliable and convincing to its audience. CSOs may need to adapt the kind of evidence they use to

different groups – the same evidence may be credible to some but not to others. Using high-quality and uncontested evidence can allow even politically radical CSOs to be fully included in policy debate. Credibility can depend on factors such as the reputation of the source and whether there is other accepted evidence which substantiates it.

7. *Communication* Evidence must be presented in an accessible and meaningful way. The most effective communication is often two-way, interactive and ongoing.

Note

1. This paper is an edited version of our ODI Working Paper 249, July 2005, reproduced with kind permission of the Overseas Development Institute.

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