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Policy Engagement for Poverty Reduction – How Civil Society Can be More Effective

Acting alone, CSOs' impact is limited in scope, scale and sustainability.

Civil society organisations (CSOs) are enormously important players in international development. They provide development services and humanitarian relief, innovate in service delivery, build local capacity and advocate with and for the poor. Acting alone, however, their impact on policy is limited in scope, scale and sustainability. CSOs need to engage in policy processes more effectively.

Despite more open and accessible policy contexts, CSOs are having a limited impact on public policy and practice in developing countries and ultimately on the lives of poor people. All too often, CSOs appear to act on their own, leading to questions about their legitimacy and accountability. Their policy positions are also increasingly questioned: researchers challenge their evidence base and policymakers question the feasibility of their recommendations.

Key points

- CSOs could have greater impact by engaging in policy processes more effectively.
- Better use of evidence by CSOs would increase their policy influence and pro-poor impact.
- Regardless of context, there are ways CSOs can maximise policy impact.

Overseas Development Institute

ODI is the UK's leading independent think-tank on international development and humanitarian issues.



This project in Tamil Nadu, India, helps communities create a visual understanding of their work.

This briefing paper focuses on why and how CSOs can engage more effectively in policy processes in international development. Section 1 sets the scene and highlights the opportunities and challenges facing CSOs policy work. Section 2 focuses on why evidence matters for CSOs' work in international development. Section 3 provides a framework that matches the engagement mechanisms and evidence needs to the critical stages of policy processes. Section 4 summarises strategic and practical advice regarding how CSOs can ensure their policy engagement is more effective, influential and sustained.

Changing Context: Opportunities and Constraints

The last 15 years have seen significant changes in the contexts affecting the relationship between CSOs and policymakers. This period

Box 1: CSOs and Development: Some Estimates

- Non-Governmental Development Organisations have estimated annual revenues of US\$12 billion.
- It is said that NGOs reach 20% of the world's poor.
- CSOs in Ghana, Zimbabwe and Kenya provide 40% of all healthcare and education.
- There are an estimated 22,000 development NGOs in Bangladesh alone.
- Recent evidence-based health reforms in rural Tanzania contributed to over 40% reductions in infant mortality between 2000 and 2003.

has been characterised by globalisation, democratisation, decentralisation, reductions in conflict, and advances in information and communication technologies (ICTs). In general, there is potential for progressive partnerships involving the public and private sectors and CSOs in more and more developing countries.

The number of CSOs is growing. Many CSOs have become aware that policy engagement can lead to greater pro-poor impacts than contestation. We see more and more examples of CSOs engaging in informed advocacy as an important route to social change and a means of holding governments to account. Sometimes this is leading to impressive outcomes.

Why then are CSOs having a surprisingly limited influence on policy and practice in developing countries? The evidence suggests that adverse political contexts are partly responsible. Often, however, the main obstacles are internal to CSOs.

Figure 1 highlights the main obstacles to CSO engagement in policy processes (from a survey of CSOs). The most common barriers were internal to CSOs, with respondents listing insufficient capacity and funding (62% and 57% respectively) as significant constraints. Others cited the closed nature of the policy process as an impediment to their participation, with 47% of respondents noting policymakers do not see CSO evidence as credible.

CSOs, Evidence and Policy

Recent ODI work shows that: (i) better outcomes stem from better policy and practice; (ii) better policy and practice occur when rigorous, systematic evidence is used; (iii) CSOs that use evidence better will have greater policy influence and greater pro-poor impact. Figure 2 outlines our framework.

Better use of evidence by CSOs can increase the policy influence and pro-poor impact of their work

Box 2: Key Terms

- CSOs refer to any organisation that works in the arena between the household, the private sector, and the state, to negotiate matters of public concern. CSOs includes NGOs, community groups, research institutes, think tanks, advocacy groups, trade unions, academic institutions, parts of the media, professional associations, and faith-based institutions.
- We take the view that policy and practice should be informed by research-based evidence. But we adopt a general, though widely accepted, definition of research as ‘any systematic effort to increase the stock of knowledge’.
- We use the term ‘policy’ to denote a purposive course of action followed by an actor or set of actors.

in three ways. First, it can help improve the impact of CSOs’ service delivery work. Second, better use of evidence can increase the legitimacy and effectiveness of their policy engagement efforts, helping CSOs to gain a place and have influence at the policy table. Finally, it can help ensure that policy recommendations really do help the poor.

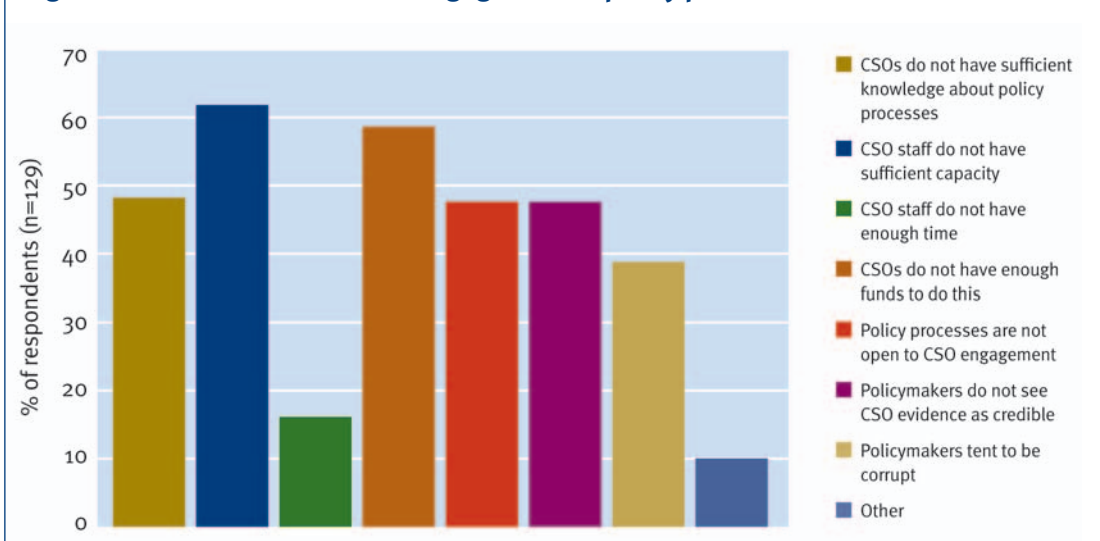
CSOs engage with policy processes in many different ways. They can:

- *Identify* the political constraints and opportunities and develop a strategy for engagement.
- *Inspire* support for an issue or action; raise new ideas or question old ones; create new ways of framing an issue or ‘policy narrative’.
- *Inform* the views of others; share expertise and experience; put forward new approaches.
- *Improve*, add, correct or change policy issues; hold policymakers accountable; evaluate and improve their own activities, particularly regarding service provision.

And research-based evidence can be influential in each of the four main stages of policy processes: agenda setting, policy formulation, decision, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

At the agenda setting stage, evidence can help put issues on the agenda and ensure they are recognised as significant problems which require a policymaker’s response. CSO inputs can be even more influential if they also provide options and realistic solutions. Better

Figure 1: Main obstacles to CSO engagement in policy processes



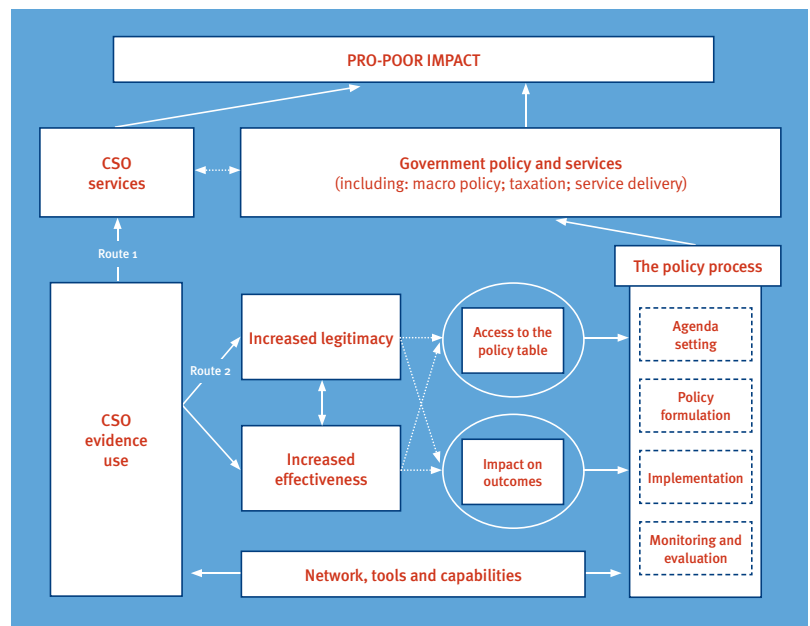
use of evidence can influence public opinion, cultural norms and political contestation and indirectly affect policy processes.

At the policy formulation stage, evidence can be an important way to establish the credibility of CSOs. Here, evidence can be used to enhance or establish a positive reputation. CSOs can adapt the way they use evidence to maintain credibility with local communities and with policymakers, combining their tacit and explicit knowledge of a policy issue. A key issue is to outline the theory of change – how the proposed policy measure will result in pro-poor impact. CSOs may also present evidence of their political position, as much as their competence, in order to be included within policy discussions.

At the implementation stage, evidence helps CSOs translate technical skills, expert knowledge and practical experiences, so as to inform others better. CSOs have often been successful innovators in service delivery that informs broader government implementation. The key to influencing implementation of policy is often to have solutions that are realistic and generalisable across different contexts.

Finally, evidence can be further used to influence the monitoring and evaluation of policy. It helps to identify whether policies are actually improving the lives of their intended beneficiaries. For example, many CSOs have pioneered participatory processes that transform the views of ordinary people into indicators and measures, garnering the interest of

Figure 2: CSOs, Evidence, Policy and Pro-Poor Impact



the media or other external groups. This can help improve policy positions and make policy processes more accountable.

CSOs could have greater influence if they were more strategic about:

- whether to engage in policy processes;
- which part of the policy process actually matters for the lives of poor people;
- which component of the process a CSO is trying to engage with; and
- what mechanism and evidence tends to matter at each stage.

Approaches for Effective Policy Engagement

There are a number of obstacles, both external and internal, which restrict CSO policy engagement. Adverse political contexts or problematic policy processes constrain or prevent CSO work. However, the main obstacles are often internal to CSOs. Below we highlight some of the ways to overcome the main obstacles facing CSOs. More detail on each is in the full report.

While our focus has been on what CSOs can do, there are also ways in which progressive policymakers and donors could help. Progressive policymakers could help by: working to ensure political freedoms are in place; making policy processes more transparent; providing access to information and providing space for CSO contributions on specific policy issues. Donors could help by providing: incentives and pressure for governments to ensure political rights and a space for CSO engagement in policy; diversifying their support to the CSO sector (beyond NGOs); and ensuring funding for informed CSO policy engagement.

Box 3 : Evidence and Policy Influence: Coalition 2000 in Bulgaria

The Coalition 2000 initiative was launched in 1998 to counteract corruption in Bulgarian society through a process of co-operation among NGOs, governmental institutions and citizens. In 2003, the Corruption Monitoring System of Coalition 2000 identified the education sector as a corruption-prone area. University professors and school teachers were consistently rated by the general public in the top five most corrupt professions in Bulgaria.

Based on this evidence, and to support governmental efforts to tackle the problem, Coalition 2000 developed and tested a set of instruments for teaching on corruption for use in secondary and tertiary education. This included designing textbooks, on-line study materials, manuals, and teaching programmes.

These experiences demonstrated to public institutions the benefits of introducing the topic into civic education curricula. They also underscored the usefulness of creating new anticorruption programmes and ready-made teaching materials for the Ministry of Education and Science. As a result, anticorruption classes were introduced in the official curricula of the Bulgarian secondary schools in the fall of 2004.

SOURCE: DIMITROVA (2005)

Approaches for Effective Policy Engagement

Key obstacles to CSOs	Potential solutions for effective policy engagement
External	
Adverse political contexts constrain CSO policy work.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Campaigns – to improve policy positions and governance contexts. • ‘Boomerangs’ – working via external partners to change national policy. • Pilot projects – to develop and test operational solutions to inform and improve policy implementation.
Internal	
Limited understanding of specific policy processes, institutions and actors.	Conduct rigorous context assessments. These enable a better understanding of how policy processes work, the politics affecting them and the opportunities for policy influence. We outline key issues and some simple approaches to mapping political contexts.
Weak strategies for policy engagement.	Identify critical policy stages – agenda setting, formulation and/or implementation – and the engagement mechanisms that are most appropriate for each stage. We provide a framework that matches the different approaches and evidence requirements to each stage in the policy process.
Inadequate use of evidence.	Ensure that evidence is relevant, objective, generalisable and practical. This helps improve CSO legitimacy and credibility with policymakers. We outline sources of research advice and mechanisms for how CSOs can access better evidence.
Weak communication approaches in policy influence work.	Engage in two-way communication and use existing tools for planning, packaging, targeting and monitoring communication efforts. Doing so will help CSOs make their interventions more accessible, digestible and timely for policy discussions. We provide examples and sources of further information.
Working in an isolated manner.	Apply network approaches. Networks can help CSOs: bypass obstacles to consensus; assemble coalitions for change; marshal and amplify evidence; and mobilise resources. We outline the key roles of networks (from filters to convenors) and the 10 keys to network success.
Limited capacity for policy influence.	Engage in systemic capacity building. CSOs need a wide range of technical capacities to maximise their chances of policy influence. We outline some key areas where CSOs could build their own capacity or access it from partners.

Conclusions

In some countries, adverse political contexts continue to be the main barrier to informed policy engagement. CSOs can try to improve the situation and influence policy but their options are limited. In many contexts, the extent of CSOs impact on policy is in their own hands. By getting the fundamentals right – assessing context, engaging policymakers, getting rigorous evidence, working with partners, communicating well – CSOs can overcome key internal obstacles. The result will be more effective, influential and sustained policy engagement for poverty reduction.

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Sources and Further Information

This briefing paper draws on the report: Court, J., Mendizabal, E., Osborne, D., and Young, J., 2006, *Policy Engagement: How Can Civil Society be More Effective*, London: ODI.

The report is based on literature reviews; a survey with responses from 130 CSOs; a range of case studies, thematic studies and practical action research projects; and a series

Join The RAPID Network

We hope this briefing paper provides insights and stimulates others to work in this area. An emerging network, coordinated initially by ODI, will focus on:

- Generating greater awareness of the importance of evidence use by CSOs.
- Providing more ‘how to’ information to CSOs interested in informed policy influence.
- Working with others to build systematic capacity in this area.
- Undertaking new research on informed CSO policy engagement.
- Supporting policy engagement on issues where CSOs can have an impact.

For further information, see: www.odi.org.uk/rapid/

To get involved, email: rapid@odi.org.uk.



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of 22 learning workshops involving over 800 people in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

The full report, other research and policy influence toolkits can be seen at: www.odi.org.uk/rapid/

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