



IOB Evaluation Newsletter

15 07

Key lessons from an evaluation of support for Policy Influencing, Lobbying and Advocacy (PILA)

for Policy Influencing, Lobbying and Advocacy (PILA) | Evaluation Newsletter # 15 07 | Key lessons from an evaluation of support for Policy Influencing, Lobbying and Advocacy (PILA)

In the report *Opening doors and unlocking potential: Key lessons from an evaluation of support for Policy Influencing, Lobbying and Advocacy (PILA)*, IOB concludes that:

- civil society organizations (CSOs) succeed to varying degrees in placing issues higher on the agenda and in influencing policy. However, influencing policy implementation, let alone impact on the ground, is far more difficult to realize.
- restrictive environments for PILA engagement and limited capacity of Southern CSOs explain the lower levels of effectiveness.
- Southern CSOs appreciate the support they receive from the Netherlands Embassies. This support is hardly strategic, however, as the Embassies don't address issues such as Southern CSOs' questionable political and social legitimacy.
- dilemmas in policy priorities and varying knowledge and experience within the Ministry pose additional challenges for effective support.

This report provides lessons that are generally applicable. PILA support could be more effective if the insights generated by this evaluation were addressed systematically by all actors, including donors, Northern NGOs and Southern CSOs.

Lessons for dealing with restrictive environments:

- donors can help defend the operating space for conducting PILA.
- a Theory of Change (ToC) based on political economy analysis is indispensable.
- customized approaches are required, as are experiments. Donors need to allow room for failure.
- coalitions pursuing a common goal are paramount.

Lessons for improving PILA capacity development:

- donors and Northern NGOs should give precedence to Southern CSOs' ownership.
- Southern CSOs need sound monitoring and evaluation systems for learning.

Context

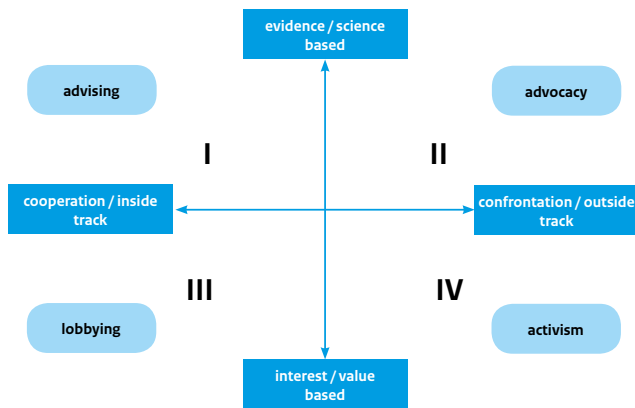
An increasing number of donors have rediscovered the important role civil society plays in creating the political conditions for achieving sustainable development. The Netherlands follows this international trend. In her letter to parliament (2013), the Dutch minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation reconfirms her commitment to a strong role for civil society. The minister is of opinion that civil society has the ability to place topics of general interest on the agendas of governments and the private sector locally, nationally and internationally. The underlying assumption is that civil society contributes to decision-making that better reflects the collective interest.

However, the role of civil society and its organizations is not uncontested. Moreover, little systematic knowledge is available about the effectiveness of donor support provided for lobbying and advocacy, or about the factors leading to or impeding its success.

This evaluation therefore answered the following question: *What are the lessons for donors and Northern NGOs to improve the effectiveness of their support to Southern CSOs' capacity to practice PILA?*

It is important to realize that policy influencing may involve different strategies (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 PILA strategies



Source: IOB, adapted from Start and Hovland (2004).

Lessons

As there is no blueprint for success, context-specific strategies and solutions are required given the complexity of PILA. It is up to the stakeholders to translate the following general lessons into concrete measures tailored to their situation.

Lessons for dealing with restrictive environments:

1) Donors can help defend the operating space for conducting PILA.

Donors can play a role in defending the space if it becomes seriously restricted. However, the influence of individual donors in the countries concerned is becoming ever more limited. Donors may therefore need to mobilize broader coalitions to build up sufficient leverage, for example at EU or UN level. The Dutch Ministry's large international network of CSOs that is part of its 25 strategic partnerships is an extra asset that could be of great value in this respect. The Ministry may wish to deliberate with its strategic partners on how to make the most of this network.

Donors and Northern NGOs may need to rethink how best to support CSOs in countries with a restrictive environment. It might imply jeopardizing other interests. Results are unlikely to be grand and clear, making support politically sensitive at home and abroad. Furthermore, legal provisions for participation do not necessarily work, unless people feel able to claim their space and are helped in doing so productively. Therefore, it is important to empower those directly affected by a policy so they can turn engagement opportunities into action.

2) A Theory of Change based on political economy analysis is indispensable.

The trend of diminishing space for Southern CSOs implies that it is important to gain a thorough understanding of the environment in which they operate. CSOs must keep track of political and socio-economic changes and should monitor the few margins that remain to conduct their PILA work.

IOB has found that the historical evolution of a PILA campaign and the extent to which a sound Theory of Change (ToC) was developed, have a positive influence on the effectiveness of PILA. However, the formulation of a ToC is something new for many CSOs, as well as for their donors. Often, their pathways to change are not explicitly described and underlying assumptions are hardly made explicit. A ToC matures through experience and is colored by the context. This requires a willingness to learn from CSOs, as well as the space to act on lessons learned and adjust policies and strategies if necessary.

3) Customized approaches are required and donors need to allow room for failure.

Donors have to tune down their ambitions to realistic levels and CSOs should report honestly about success, failure and lessons learned. The evaluation has found that it can take years or even decades before PILA results in policy changes, or even in getting issues on the agenda. Moreover, it is often unpredictable if and when policy change will occur.

For donors and Northern NGOs this implies that support should be long-term, or should at least be seen as a contribution to processes

that may take much longer than their own financial budgeting cycles. Donors should therefore ensure solidity and continuity of their policies. It also implies that one should be realistic about the achievable results and that indicators should also reflect intermediate results. Since it is uncertain when results will occur, it would be advisable to accommodate a certain degree of flexibility in the PILA program design and implementation process. In this way, routes that prove less fruitful may be exchanged for avenues where opportunities arise.

For Southern CSOs this implies that the design of PILA campaigns should be realistic about the sphere of influence. The campaign needs to be based on a deep understanding of the incentives of specific lobby targets to change. CSOs have to think about the changes that could actually be achieved and should not fall into the trap of inflating expected results to satisfy unrealistic donor expectations.

4) Coalitions pursuing a common goal are paramount.

IOB has learned from the evaluation that it is becoming increasingly difficult for individual Southern CSOs to be effective in their PILA campaigns. Their legitimacy is often at stake, and the large interests of the corporate sector and the harsher environment in which Southern CSOs have to operate require a heavier countervailing power. To strengthen their position, Southern CSOs may revise their strategies: involve and mobilize their constituency systematically; link with other CSOs with more legitimacy in representing citizens' interests; support their work with more evidence-based research; and operate in local, national and international networks and coalitions that add value to their work.

Networks of donors, Northern NGOs and Southern CSOs are of the utmost importance, and work is needed to ensure they are based on symmetry and equality. This implies that leadership is shared and that members aim to satisfy the interests of all members. Furthermore, sufficient transparency is necessary, and knowledge and data have to be shared. Other capacity requirements for effective PILA coalitions are that CSOs deal with diversity and power asymmetries within their networks, and that they continuously reflect on the added value of these networks.

Donors also face dilemmas. It is difficult for them to reach out to organizations beyond their established networks. Furthermore, their policies, financial support and attached administrative demands invoke 'upward accountability', at the expense of 'downward accountability' from the CSOs to their constituencies. However, even though issues of inadequate legitimacy and lack of support are valid, donors should not stop financing NGOs altogether, as they may be among the few implementing organizations in place. After all, given the increasingly restrictive environments for civil society, it may be unrealistic to expect local organizations to evolve independently.

Lessons for improving PILA capacity development:

5) Donors and Northern NGOs should give precedence to Southern CSOs' ownership.

Developing capacity for PILA is an evolutionary process that is founded on a particular CSO's work and experiences. Agility is an essential element of PILA capacity. This means being ready and determined when the opportunity arises. Capacity development is hindered when CSOs do not consider this critical for their effectiveness, or when donor practices restrict CSO ownership of the PILA agenda and of the ToC.

For CSOs, an essential part of capacity development is that they focus on longer-term campaigns. This implies that they move away from *ad hoc* activities, which are often initiated by donors. With taking on the final responsibility for achieving results, also comes the responsibility for accountability. CSOs should therefore ensure that they are able to justify their actions.


Donors have several options to recognize Southern CSOs ownership, for example by redesigning accountability and reporting requirements attached to their funding. Donors aiming to support PILA capacity development should allow for more operating space and autonomy of Southern CSOs than is usually the case in project or program funding. This implies that Southern CSOs should initiate program design instead of Northern NGOs, as is often still the case. The Dutch strategic partnerships are no exception, as Dutch NGOs often take the lead in program design.

Northern NGOs may wish to explore new forms of partnerships with Southern CSOs that are more symmetrical. However, this gets complicated as Northern NGOs play dual roles: they conduct PILA in collaboration with Southern CSOs, and provide support to Southern CSO to conduct their own PILA. In practice, both overlap, which sometimes confuses matters and may jeopardize Southern ownership.

6) Southern CSOs need sound monitoring and evaluation systems for learning.

Tacit knowledge, the informal knowledge about how and why things work, is an essential part of an organization's capacity, and its ability to stay relevant under changing circumstances. Learning-by-doing, supported by regular reflection based on a ToC, helps to systematize this knowledge and make it available for broader application. However, many CSOs are preoccupied with satisfying donors' reporting requirements to avoid risking their funding. They hardly utilize their own monitoring and evaluation system for organizational learning.

Capacity development requires that CSOs take their own monitoring and evaluation system more seriously and consider accountability – both downward to their constituency and upward to their donor – as a critical element of their own good governance. Furthermore, if donors are serious about capacity development and are ready to put learning-by-doing center stage, they may wish to adjust their reporting requirements accordingly. This also means focusing more on outcomes and impact, rather than on outputs.



The Policy and Operations Evaluation Department (IOB) of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs carries out independent assessments of the efficiency, effectiveness, relevance, coherence and sustainability of Dutch foreign policy. It thus provides accountability concerning the results of policy, as well as information to enhance policy. The quality of IOB's assessments is guaranteed by means of systematic and transparent procedures.

All IOB evaluations are in the public domain and are brought to the notice of parliament. IOB also seeks to make evaluations accessible to the Dutch public and to partners in the countries concerned. Reports can be freely obtained and a summary of the most important findings is published in the form of the IOB Evaluation Newsletter.

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